

Sean Wybrant, technology teacher at Palmer High School, Colorado Springs District 11. He was the 2017 Colorado Teacher of the Year

The Spark: *How have you been and are you holding up during this crisis?*

Sean Wybrant: It's quite the 180. I'm doing good. My family and everyone is safe and healthy. That is the most important thing right now. We have an adult dependent who we are taking care of. One of the nice things for my kids is this is very real for them. The whole social distancing. It has been good to have the kids step into the role of helping their elders. Part of that is not going out and getting sick and getting others sick. They have been able to understand it.

The Spark: *What would you like to say to the state's teachers?*

Wybrant: From a teaching perspective, it is interesting. That is in process. Everyone is still trying to figure out what the best response is and the next step. It is our spring break but we are working to inform the district plan and policy and procedures to make sure the students are really taken care of.

Part of that is to make sure that people have the message that this is the great opportunity for schools and families to come together. Families don't need packets and packets of school material now. They need to feel loved and feel connected to the school district. Students need to feel they are important human beings and that we care if they are scared and we are giving them support.

But with equity issues of getting online and kids being scared, the first thing we need to do is to make sure that kids feel OK and that they know there are people there for them. That is what we have been talking to districts about. We need to have a humanistic response. At least what I am talking about, is let's go slow. Let's reach out and connect with people to see what they need before we have plans on what they have to do. What does this week after spring break look like?

If we don't have to think about school in the same way and try to transition our traditional school environments into this new space we will have more flexibility. There are a lot of questions about what this does look like. Going slow and having individual touch points for everyone in our district is a way better approach.

The Spark: *What are you telling your fellow teachers?*

Wybrant: What I am pushing for is taking the next week to do professional development for teachers and have touch points with family. Getting kids to get online there is going to have to be training. For us to think we are going to hit the ground running with immediate lessons that

are going to be meaningful, that is just not going to happen. There isn't much time between now and then. There isn't a way to have that roll out and be effective.

There's a lot of things to figure out what instruction looks like without a bell schedule. This opens up so many interesting opportunities for us to rethink what institution looks like. We can have students help us figure out solutions. What does graduation look like? Can we have students working in interdisciplinary ways to work on the issues about pandemic. To have students understand they are part of history right now. That is important.

We are going to be setting kids up for having to run a whole school out of their house. That isn't what we want. We want families and kids to learn and do meaningful work and develop curiosity. Good social touch points: do kids feel like they are part of a community? That's what I have been pushing.

The Spark: What kind of recommendations do you have for teachers?

Wybrant: I would encourage teachers to know, No. 1, that you don't have to have all the answers. You don't have to know what this is all going to look like. It's OK to figure this out together. None of us are in this alone. Lots of support. You can make your own community. There's never been a better time to get online and fill that need yourself if there isn't anything there. All it takes is an email or following someone on Twitter. There are great resources for teachers to connect to, such as personalized learning networks.

The national network of state Teachers of the Year have been putting together Zoom chats about everything from teaching special education, literacy, math. How do we support our most at-need kids? I am going to host one about computer science instruction.

There are going to be a million resources. Teachers should be careful about overwhelming families with lots and lots of resources. The majority of our kids didn't sign up to go onto online schools. Transitioning into this, for now, less is more.

There are going to be some teachers who want to jump in and do content. There are going to be kids who can't do that. We have to be careful how we onboard kids on doing academics. Be careful when you are going to be providing new content. With equity issues and access issues, you have to think about how we provide new content and support.

The Spark: *What would you tell teachers who are feeling stressed out about this?*

Wybrant: Give yourself grace. Give yourself space to learn how to do this. Another thing I would say is the second bucket is look for opportunities but opportunities that don't overwhelm our students and families.

Be thoughtful about the things you are bringing in. Think about what you're doing for students who don't have access. Think about how they can support other teachers. What can you do to help out other people and what help do you need? We have amazing teachers. We have great ESP staff. There are people who are looking for ways to help people out. Be one of those people who helps people out. It's a matter of us finding the right matches.

We need to come up with significant and solid supports for our brand new teachers. We have a bunch of new teachers who weren't trained for this. Your first year you are swamped anyway. We need to have supports that don't put too much work on our teachers. We need to retain and recruit new people ..

Spark: *What has this experience shown you?*

Wybrant: It's really shown some spotlights on the issues that we need to address. A lot of people are in a super reactive mode now. They aren't thinking about what the possibilities are. What we need now is to think about what kids should be doing and what opportunities are there in this. Not just how we do business but why. I am now on exactly the same schedule that every teacher is. I could, if the district decides they want to do this, I could be in a group with a middle school and elementary teacher. We could be trying to guide our students to have facilitated talk with middle school students to teach elementary school students about a concept. We haven't thought significantly how we could leverage that. We could have instruction that could bring families together and provide support.

There are all these options and opportunities. We need to go slower so we can explore those opportunities instead of making packets for kids to do. It's a great thing to have students teaching each other. Getting connected with authors. If we go too fast, then I think it won't be as transformative and may not set us up well for when this happens again. Families should never feel like they are the ones who are teaching their students. That is not an expectation that schools should be putting on parents.

Meg Cypress is a fifth-grade teacher at Bradley International School in Denver Public Schools. She was the 2019 Colorado Teacher of the Year.

The Spark: *How are you managing this crisis?*

Meg Cypress: Right now, we are all making sure we are collaborating with teammates and teachers. Using peers to help us. This is really new for all of us. I do videos all the time. For me,

wrapping my head around this is not overwhelming. But I know it is for a lot of teachers. But we are all talking and visiting with each other to see what is working for whom. Using resources.

The Spark: *What are you telling your colleagues?*

Cypress: This is new. It is ok that we are going to make mistakes. That is what I will push out. Be good to yourself.

The Spark: What did you learn when you first started using video in your classroom and what advice would you give?

Cypress: From when I first started, I was putting too much expectation on the curriculum. My first videos were full of everything I wanted to say on the screen. Now I look back and say, "That's way too much." They weren't absorbing what I wanted them to get. They need the most important things. Don't do too much.

The Spark: *Explain how you use video every day.*

Cypress: My classroom is set up so I do a mini lesson to the whole class. My students after that can work independently. But I also arrange them in groups. One group will be looking at videos. One group will be listening to a different lesson while I will meet with another group. They will rotate. One group will be listening to a vocab lesson that I will tape. And they will also have the videos to watch at home.

The Spark: *How do you envision the at-home learning working for your class?*

Cypress: For me, it's going to be important to make contact with each student every day. I will do my reading aloud with them. I will give them my lesson on recorded video and then give them the assignment. I will do a check in. They will send information back. They will finish the assignment on Google drive. My kids are ready for this. They do this all the time. They know how to access Google Drive. We have set up everything that we need.

I think we are going to be OK. I miss giving them hugs and miss seeing them. I feel terrible for the families who are worried about getting food and a job.

The Spark: What do you say to teachers who are stressed out about this?

Cypress: What a great job teachers are doing coming together. Celebrate that. We have months to plan lessons and you think about those lessons all the time. Then here we are rolling out something so new in a matter of a few days. We need to celebrate each other and say congrats on doing a great job. Can you believe these organizations that are giving teachers free info and free online resources? I am so wowed that everyone is coming together for students.

Really, understand that you are going to make some mistakes. You don't need to be perfect. We are learning as we go. Everyone is doing the best we can. Be patient with the families because

this is new for them too. Remember, sometimes computers are going to glitch. That will probably bother you. But you need to just know when to laugh. Every day, there will be a learning curve. Something will work today that may not work tomorrow.

The Spark: *Are you going to talk to your students about how they are living through an historic time?*

Cypress: Yes. I am going to have them journal every day. I want them to keep this journal. This is a once in a lifetime thing. What is happening to us is historical. We are going to journal about it. Research about it. We will watch CNN 10 about it.

Hilary Wimmer is a business teacher at Mountain Range High School in Adams 12 Five Star Schools in Thornton. She is the current Colorado Teacher of the Year.

The Spark: *What do you want to tell Colorado's teachers who are about to go back into being a teacher but not in the classroom?*

Wimmer: A lot of people are concerned about getting all of their curriculum done. I want people to remember we are in crisis. Just like any crisis. You want to check in with the kids, making sure each one is OK. We really need to ground kids. Many are scared. I had a student having a panic attack before we left, saying she doesn't think she can handle it.. Kids look to their teachers for reassurance. We are reassuring them that everything is OK.

The most important thing to remember is we are now in a period of crisis education. You aren't going to be able to deliver 100% of your content. What are the most important outcomes that kids need to know when they leave. It's more about a life education now. Taking those essential things and focusing on those. We have to go back to our essentials in your classroom.

The Spark: *What are you telling your colleagues who are stressed out about this?*

Wimmer: Check in with yourself regularly. Find a way to do that. Go for a jog. Meditate. Relieve some of the anxiety. Eat healthier. I know some teachers who are making more meals at home. Understand when you need to ask for help. There are teachers in every situation. There are teachers who are having their spouses losing their job. Reach out to others if you need help. This is a big transition. We are being asked to redefine everything we are doing in a few weeks. It's very stressful.

One thing for teachers to remember, give yourself the same care and grace that you give your students. For many of us, this is going to be like going back to your first year of teaching. Be

prepared for that. Give yourself some flexibility. Be willing to learn and change. Be positive. This will be a good change.

The Spark: *You teach a course on the economy after a zombie apocalypse. Funny, that seems weirdly relevant now.*

Wimmer: That's the beauty of being in business and what I teach. I prepare kids, even in the worst moments of crisis that there are great opportunities to be a great human being and a great business leader. This is where you see the great beauty in human beings. A lot of times in crisis is when innovation occurs. I am having my students look for the shining spots in these scenarios. How can you capitalize them and make the world a better place?

Right now, I am sewing facemasks. I know a lot of nurses. I am sitting here on spring break and I can't go anywhere. I am focusing on what I can do for others. It's been fun. It's actually people in our community asking for that. Homeless shelters are requesting them. I now have my former teacher mentor reaching out. I had some of my elementary school moms reaching out saying, "I can help." It's really starting a movement. The idea came from my daughter Cameron.

This is one example. How are you going to be the leader who steps into that space? Give our kids a sense of power rather than being a victim. It's more about how we can empower our students to be the great leaders they are capable of being.

The Spark: *You are finding the silver lining in this, aren't you?*

Wimmer: We are able to tie in financial literacy into this. I have always told my students to save up at least \$1,000 for emergency savings. Now the kids understand why. It's a huge opportunity to teach them. Kids are now having to do video lessons and work with technology for their schooling. This is exactly what the workplace is asking for. Businesses have been saying younger workers don't understand teleconferencing or the structure of working from home. We are preparing the workforce.

Christina Randle is a first-grade teacher at Soaring Eagles Elementary School in Harrison School District No. 2. She was the 2018 Colorado Teacher of the Year.

The Spark: *How are you doing through all of this?*

Christina Randle: We are on spring break this week, so I feel pretty good. We had a teacher parade through the school neighborhood today, and it made me a little emotional. I miss the kids terribly, and I am a big hugger, so it is so hard not to jump out and give them each a squeeze!

Last week was stressful working from home, being a parent, and then working with my own girls in a teaching role. I think we are all surviving the moment, and that moment continues to change each day.

The Spark: *What are you doing to prepare for your school's at-home-learning?*

Randle: As soon as we were out, I started a class Facebook page to keep the kids connected. I have also sent out emails to parents with resources and reassurance that we will get through this together. We are just receiving more direction from my district around at-home learning expectations, so we are in the early planning stages. I had a conference call with my team yesterday to process what this could look like, and right now we are trying to design things that all students can do independently in the event there is no adult to help them. The tricky thing with the younger kids is they are more dependent on an adult to allow access and help them navigate the internet.

The Spark: *Do your first-graders have online capabilities? What are you doing with those who don't?*

Randle: We did contact every student and most in my class are fortunate enough to have online capabilities. Some access with a phone, others with a laptop or desktop. For the families that do not have internet access, we are creating paper packets. I know many districts are working hard to ensure whatever is rolled out is most equitable.

The Spark: *We've talked to teachers with older students, how do you see this going with younger kids?*

Randle: As I alluded to before, I think it is much trickier for the younger kiddos, as they are more reliant on an adult allowing them access and helping them to navigate resources and websites. They need a little more guidance; if something does not make sense, they may not be able to reach out to the teacher and seek clarification as easily. I think we need to remember that many families are also experiencing unrest and navigating a new normal, perhaps working from home or out of work completely. As we design at-home learning expectations, we need to keep that in mind. For me, remaining connected to the kids is more important than actual lessons or instruction.

The Spark: *What are the challenges and how do you see getting around those?*

Randle: There are so many challenges with at-home learning, and they seem magnified when asked to make it happen on short notice. Lack of reliable internet access; lack of devices for students to access the work at home (some families have four or five kids and one reliable device); meeting the needs of our unique learners, whether they are English Language Learners, special education, or gifted and talented; some teachers are not as comfortable with technology and are now being asked to design and deliver online instruction; designing activities for students assuming they have access to minimal resources (pencil and paper). You know,

getting around these issues has no “easy” answer. I think allowing ourselves a little grace in the process is going to be key; it is not going to be perfect.

The Spark: *What is your advice to teachers out there who are feeling stressed out about this?*

Randle: If there is such a thing as “good timing”, I would say this is the best time for something like this to happen. You have given your students three quarters of solid instruction. They are going to be okay, and whenever we get back together, we will meet our students where they are. Right now, let’s make sure our students still feel loved and their families still feel supported; the rest will come together. Moreover, I hope everyone remembers that this is not a contest to see who does at-home learning best; it is not about outshining each other. Reach out to your colleagues for help: learn, share, and grow. We are all broken-hearted being away from our students, but I know our broken hearts will continue to lead and do right by students.

I think it would be helpful for schools to work together and have each grade level make note of the last lessons they were on and what skills may have been in the introductory phase still. Pass this information onto the next grade level. Then next year, instead of jumping headfirst into curriculum, we will need to fill some holes and change course a bit to meet the kids where they are at.

The Spark: *What should teachers keep in mind as they are planning their new schedules?*

Randle: This can be a scary or sad time for our kids and families. I just hope we can continue to keep relationships and connections at the forefront. And please do not forget to take time for yourself; it is too easy to become consumed trying to master online learning. Take a breath and do something you love!