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The School Year Hasn't Been Easy, But My Students Have Pushed Through at Every Turn

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Faith Martin leads the fourth grade team at Boston Renaissance Charter Public School in the Hyde Park section of Boston, Massachusetts. [FULL PROFILE →](#)

When I gathered with my fellow teachers at Boston Renaissance Charter Public School K-6 before the start of the school year, it was with a mixture of excitement and apprehension. For the first time in 18 months, we'd be returning to in-person classes

five days a week and we were laser focused on strategies to help our students academically, socially and emotionally. As a fourth grade math and science teacher, I've always had an idea of what I wanted each new school year to look like. This year, however, I understood that my incoming students hadn't experienced a normal school year since they were in second grade. What would that look like for them?

WE COULDN'T WAIT TO SEE OUR STUDENTS FACE-TO-FACE.

While there would be many unknowns, one thing all of us teachers knew for sure was we couldn't wait to see our students face-to-face. Turns out, that feeling was mutual. From the very first day of school, our students would quite literally run into our classrooms, excited to see us and their peers again. The corridors were alive again, buzzing with jubilant students excited to learn and get back into a routine. And since most of our students are still too young to get vaccinated, they are still masked all day and eat their lunch six feet apart—and all of them are thoroughly unfazed by it. During math class, my students were enthusiastic to engage with the games and hands-on manipulatives they hadn't had access to in their remote settings. I could tell in those very first days that they'd be able to readjust quickly. Math is such a conceptual subject, as is science. Being able to participate in experiments, instead of just observing them via Zoom, would bring them a richer understanding.

WE RUN FORMAL AND INFORMAL ASSESSMENTS ON INDIVIDUAL STUDENTS TO GET A SENSE OF WHERE THEY ARE WITH ALL OF THEIR FOUNDATIONAL STANDARDS SO WE'RE ABLE TO MEET THEM THERE.

Another factor this year that is helping us bring students up to grade level is our collection of data. We run formal and informal assessments on individual students to get a sense of where they are with all of their foundational standards so we're able to meet them there. For instance, last year, my fourth graders were learning about energy, which is an important standard in the science curriculum and comes up a lot on standardized tests. I made sure the fifth grade teacher knew that his incoming students would need to spend more time in this area, just as I received feedback from third grade teachers on where to train my focus with my new class.

At Renaissance, we also have these structured periods called WIN "What I Need" Blocks which are already proving invaluable. During these periods, we break up students into smaller groups depending upon what they need most. Some require review around foundational concepts, while others who are at or above grade level are assigned extension projects to work on during the block.

One of the most important concepts we relay to our students is that we are not comparing them to their neighbors, but instead are trying to learn how we can best help them. We assure them that we really want them to make those gains. This is why every other Friday, all of our WIN Blocks are dedicated to [social and emotional learning](#). In these spaces, we really lean into [restorative justice practices](#), allowing them to express how they're feeling, while teaching them how to interact and respect one another's differences.

As resilient as my students have been, I've also found I've had to readjust my own thinking when it comes to how I structure my classroom. When the kids were remote, they could move around, stand up at a table or talk to family members and siblings. In order to be able to sit at a desk and focus on a task—especially with our extended days—the kids need to move. I now implement structured movement breaks much more than I have in years past — something I will likely keep on the schedule going forward.

TEACHERS AND FAMILIES WERE PARTNERS IN NAVIGATING THE REMOTE SCHOOL YEAR.

Also, this year we hope to build upon the relationships we built with parents and families while we were present in their homes for more than a year via Zoom. Teachers and families were partners in navigating the remote school year. Having parent-teacher conferences virtually made them more accessible for all families, and it's something I plan to continue.

We're approaching the four month mark in our post-remote school year and I'm happy to report that the students' enthusiasm remains high, their pride in the work they're producing at school endures, and their resilience in the face of so much disruption is inspiring. As a teacher, that's really half the battle.

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