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# WHAT A FIRST YEAR!

BY MICHELE (CUMMINGS) SOLOMON '91



The first year of teaching can be daunting for any recent graduate, even under the best of circumstances. But starting your education career in the middle of COVID-19? Now that's a challenge of pandemic proportions. But recent School of Education graduates have weathered their first semester with faith, grace, and creativity.

## PREPARING FOR THE UNPRECEDENTED

Cedarville's School of Education has a long history of effectively preparing its graduates to enter the education field. "Preparedness doesn't equate with problem-free teaching," said Lori (Brown) Ferguson '98, Assistant Dean and Assistant Professor of Education, "but [students] do feel ready."

It's normal to expect challenges with classroom management and lesson planning, but no one could have anticipated the additional challenges brought on by a global pandemic. But for recent Cedarville education graduates, their excellent preparation helped free them to focus on COVID-specific challenges.

"Going into my first year, I felt confident about how to teach content and how to use the tools for developing routine and classroom management," explained Shannon LaMonte '20, who is teaching kindergarten at Primrose School in Canal Winchester, Ohio. "I was then able to focus on the new challenges that COVID has brought about in the classroom."

Hannah (Heft) Tiell '20 teaches high school special education at Franklinton Prep High School in Columbus, Ohio. "I felt so well prepared for all the special education paperwork," she shared. "I have been able to stay compliant

with state regulations, even with the challenges of teaching a class of students as well as some online."

## READY TO ADJUST

Even for the best-prepared teacher, the challenges of this year have been intense. Many did not know if they would teach in person or online until right before school started. Others have gone back and forth between the two as COVID cases rose throughout the semester; some have juggled both teaching methods at the same time.

"The amount of stress is insane. I've never experienced anything like this before," shared Ariel (Schantz) Ketchum '20, who is teaching fourth grade science in person and online at St. Charles Catholic School in Lima, Ohio. "It's one thing to manage a classroom, but it's another to manage a virtual and physical classroom at the exact same time."

After teaching all day in class, Ketchum spends time in the evening helping an online student. "It's draining," she said.

One of the greatest challenges, according to Ferguson, is the lack of family atmosphere that typically defines a school. Teachers have to keep their distance from each other, and collaboration and chance hallway conversations



are not happening like they usually do. Veteran teachers are struggling themselves with the changes caused by COVID, and may not be as available to help a new teacher. “This could be the most detrimental to first-year teachers,” she shared. “We rely on each other in this field for resources, expertise, and support.”

## The biggest challenge is truly that I cannot see their faces and their smiles.

*Kylie Beste '20*

New teachers have also had to adjust much of what they were taught in their coursework to fit the COVID environment. Teaching methods such as using manipulatives — physical objects that are used to reinforce learning through hands-on learning — and group work have been adjusted to keep students safe and distanced.

“Every class I took emphasized the use of manipulatives, partner talks, and interactive learning,” shared Kylie Beste '20, who teaches fourth grade at Greeneview Elementary in Jamestown, Ohio. “With COVID, many of those activities, when used, involve extra steps — wipe down this, stay distanced, don't forget to keep your mask up.”

## MASKED CONFUSION

The use of masks in the classroom has created a whole new set of issues for first-year teachers. “It's extremely difficult to communicate with students with half my face covered all the time,” explained Tyler Brophy '20, who teaches alternative high school students at Tri-County North High School in Lewisburg, Ohio. “They have to assume all my emotions and facial expressions based on what my eyes are doing and my tone of voice.”

For LaMonte, it has been challenging teaching letters and sounds to her kindergarteners while wearing a mask, since they can't see her mouth. “It's also difficult to hear what some of my students are saying,” she added.

Masks have made teaching less personal for many teachers. “The biggest challenge is truly that I cannot see their faces and their smiles,” explained Beste, “and they can't see the joy in my face when I want to show them I am proud of them.” Her students have expressed excitement when she switches to a clear face shield and they can see her smile.

For Brophy, masks have also created discipline issues that distract from teaching content. “Telling students to keep their masks on and having to punish students for not wearing

their masks is a unique challenge that makes me have to fight battles that are unrelated to their academic success or growth in character,” he explained. “Making sure kids wear their masks has been a challenge that has been almost impossible to fight,” Tiell echoed.

## BRACING FOR THE UNKNOWN

Another unique challenge for this year’s first-year teachers is the constantly changing environment due to the pandemic. Because students regularly come in and out of quarantine, teachers don’t always know who will be there on a daily basis. “I never know what to expect each day, so I have given up planning ahead,” explained Tiell. “I just walk in each day with a general understanding of what I am about to do and throw it all out the window depending on what students I have each day.”

The uncertainty weighs on the students as well. “My kids pray every morning that we will get to stay together with our classroom family. I’m continually having students coming in and out of quarantine, which is scary for them,” shared LaMonte. “Not being able to promise them that we’ll stay together is heartbreaking.”

But for many of Cedarville’s first-year teachers, this uncertainty has provided opportunities to have meaningful conversations and model faith in how they interact with their

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*Ariel (Schantz) Ketchum '20*

students and their fellow teachers. “Whenever questions about life and deeper meaning come up, I am unashamed to share what I believe,” said Brophy. “I have been able to share a shortened version of the Gospel and directly plant a seed with three of my students already!”

Tiell works with students who come from difficult backgrounds and have a lot of deep questions about life. “I have been able to answer these questions from a Gospel perspective,” she shared. Since she teaches at a parochial school, Ketchum has been able to incorporate Scripture and the Gospel into her science lessons every day. “It’s awesome!” she said.

## LOVING FIRST

Through the challenges, Cedarville’s first-year teachers have tried to focus on what’s most important: their students and sharing God’s love with them. “I just want to fully be there for them and love them well in this job I have been given,” shared Beste.

Ferguson advises her former students to — for this season — focus on relationships more than keeping up with the set curriculum. “They are professionals who are prepared to take the love of Jesus to their students in a way that meets each of them where they are,” she said. “Safety and love will better prepare their students for learning.”

For now the new teachers are persevering through this difficult season, trusting God for strength to endure and looking forward to better days ahead. “I have learned to hold loosely to my own plans and hold strongly to the Lord’s,” said Beste.

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