

**Interviewee:** Melinda Ruzich

**Interviewer:** Jordan Stish

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**Abstract:** Melinda Ruzich is a 20-year veteran kindergarten teacher from Hibbing, Minnesota, a rural town 229 miles (about 4 hours) north of Eau Claire. Melinda is also undergoing treatments for breast cancer, and she has been immunocompromised for the entirety of the pandemic. In her interview, Melinda discusses how her cancer treatments impacted her ability to teach during the early stages of the pandemic in 2020 as well as how her job has changed over the past 20 months. Melinda shares how childhood development has evolved at the early childhood and kindergarten levels and how her role as a teacher has shifted. Melinda also discusses how parents and the public have interfered with her (and other teachers in her district) abilities to teach in schools safely. She discusses her school district's mask mandate and the public's response and pushback to vaccinations and masking in the small, rural community in Northern Minnesota.

### **Jordan Stish 0:03**

All right. So today is Tuesday, November 30, 2021. The time is 2:30pm. Just to give some context before we start this interview today, at this time, there have been over 47 point 7 million cases of COVID-19 in the United States and over 770,000 deaths in the nation. As 2021 comes to a close, COVID cases are on the rise again, in Wisconsin, where I am currently and in Minnesota where Melinda, my interview[ee] is today. There are over 4000 new cases weekly in each state, according to the Centers of Disease Control. Some other really important data from the CDC [Centers for Disease Control] for this interview is that one in 4 k12 educators are at risk for COVID-19 exposure in the United States at this time, which may begin to change though because in November of 2021, children aged five to 11 in the United States were approved to begin receiving the Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine. Here to talk about her thoughts about COVID-19. And its impacts on the education system is Melinda Ruzich, a kindergarten teacher in Hibbing Minnesota, a small school district in northern Minnesota, approximately four hours north of Eau Claire, Wisconsin, where I am today. So, thank you so much for meeting with me today, Melinda, I'm really happy that you're going to be able to chat. This pandemic has really showed us how many aspects of our daily lives can be easily affected. And as we've seen, the field of education has not been immune to pandemic related struggles. Why don't you start off by telling me just a little bit about yourself, please provide me with a little bit of demographic information

about you if you feel comfortable. And I would also really like to know what you do as a teacher every day.

**Melinda Ruzich 1:57**

Alright, well, I currently teach kindergarten and K [kindergarten]-2 [second grade] school, and like you said in Hibbing Minnesota, we are one of two elementary schools here in town. I currently have a class of 17 children. And let's see myself, [laughs] I guess I have been teaching for I don't even know how many years like a lot of years. I've been teaching for quite some time. Probably almost I'd say 20 years, most has been here in Hibbing and most of my time has been in kindergarten. I taught for a little while in Arizona, but most of my time has been in kindergarten. I married I have two children, two teenage sons. And let's see what else what else can I [say]?

**JS 2:46**

Why did you get into teaching or what inspired you to go into the field of education?

**MR 2:48**

Well, honestly, I wasn't going to go into teaching, I was going to be a news broadcaster. But I ended up being able to go to college here in town. And they had a program and my mom had just gone through the program to get her teaching degree. And she said try it out. So, I tried it out and then found my passion. I absolutely love teaching and I absolutely love teaching kindergarten. So that's great.

**JS 2:57**

Thank you. And if you don't mind sharing, how old are your two boys? And what grade are they in school?

**MR 3:27**

I [have] Nicholas [who] is a sophomore. He's 16. And Spencer is an eighth grader. And he is 13.

**JS 3:31**

So, I'm going to have a follow-up question about their experiences with education and the pandemic a little bit later. But before we really get into COVID-19 and education, I would love to know how the pandemic has impacted you, either in the field of education in your career or in

your personal life. How has your daily life been impacted for the past 20 months, because it's hard to believe it has already been 20 months of this pandemic.

### **MR 4:03**

I know that is so true. So, starting out, let's see. Personally, I am a breast cancer survivor. So that impacted me a bit more than maybe some others. I obviously was immunocompromised, and my doctors were really nervous about you know, how, if I would were to contract COVID how that would impact me because it being an upper respiratory issue. The meds that I'm on already-- I struggle with breathing and you know, respiratory issues to begin with. So, they were really nervous as to how that would impact me if I were to contract it. I have not contracted it and no one in my immediate family household has contracted it. We are all we are all fully vaccinated and I just got my booster last week. So, we have been very lucky knock on wood [knocks on table] that none of us have been sick with COVID but not actually sick hardly at all. My boys have been impacted a lot through their sports and things like that, but we can get to that later. I'm also quite lucky because most of my family is also vaccinated. So, like this Thanksgiving, we were able to get together. But in class, like you said, a lot of the children that I teach, were not able to get vaccinated until very recently. And so that really was a little bit scary and a little bit, you know, I, we are a little bit worried about that. But so far, it's not been real bad in our school. So, we're just keeping our fingers crossed, we are currently required to mask here in school. So that I think has really cut down on the numbers, which I think it was really made an impact. Other than that, just being home, and being quarantined, has been interesting for mental health and for just, you know, how you're going to go about your daily life, you know, getting groceries, and all of that kind of stuff is all been impacted, especially in a rural area where we live, you know, getting groceries, sometimes it's just hard in general. So, when you're hitting it, you know, a pandemic, and there's really nothing on the shelves, that is a little bit tougher when you're in such a remote area, but we made it work, and we never went without, so I can't complain.

### **JS 6:19**

That's great to hear. And for the purposes of this interview, I would like to disclose that I do know Melinda, she teaches in the same school district as my mother does. And coincidentally enough, which is kind of a sad coincidence, my mother, is also a breast cancer survivor. And she and Melinda went through some of their treatments together. So, if you don't mind, I'd like to ask just a quick question about that. So, I know for my mom, the pandemic was kind of a blessing in disguise, chemotherapy really wore down on her body, and being home actually gave her a little bit more time to rest and recuperate between her chemotherapy and radiation treatments. Did you feel anything like that, as well? Or was it a little bit different for you?

**MR 7:03**

I agree with that, I think, you know, being able to be home and not having that physical, you know, part of teaching kindergarten, you don't sit down all day long. You know, you go Go, go, go go. And, you know, obviously, like you said, it's very wearing on your body, you're very tired. So, you would get exhausted just from being online with the kids. But at least you were able to sit, and I would take little breaks. And I'm not having to have that commute to go home. So, it'd be like you'd get done with, you know, an online class. And you could maybe go take a little rest before your next one, or you could be sitting down for a lot of it really helped and also being in your own home.

**JS 7:43**

Definitely, yeah. So could you kind of describe you mentioned doing online lessons at a time. So that was quite a bit different than teaching in person in the school? Could you explain what that kind of looked like your day to day teaching online?

**MR 8:00**

Sure. So, the first, you know, when we went into full shutdown in March, at the end of two years ago, now it is, we were given five days to prep [by the school district]. And we weren't told how long that was going to be how long we were going to be out. Nobody really knew anything. So, I have a team of five kindergarten teachers that I work with. And coincidentally enough and very much in our favor. All five of us have a master's degree in design and technology. So that made being online much easier. What we did was I would call it divide and conquer. So, we had five days to prep for 44 days, we had had 44 days left in the school year. So all of us took our iPads which thankfully we have one to one iPads in the school district, took our iPads went into our classrooms and we all recorded 44 math lessons, 44 handwriting lessons, 44 math lessons, 44 science lessons, 44 Social Studies, lessons and 44 social and emotional lessons and have them all ready to go and then put them up on a platform on our school website so that the parents could be able to access them. We also had one to one iPads like I said, so the children were able to take home their iPads, we also had hotspots available for those that struggled to get Wi Fi at their home. So that is how we got through the first part of the pandemic. Then summer came. Then we started the next year. And we were you know in and out all your lock we would be in person for a little while and then we would be home for a little while. So, we were very prepared. We also gave the option in our school district to be remote or distance learning like we called it or in person. And the way that our school decided to do it each school in our district decided to tackle it a little bit differently. Our our school decided to keep our regular class lists, and each one of us had a few students who were strictly distance learning. So that meant all of our lessons had to be recorded and had to be available so that those children had lessons or if at a moment's notice, children had to go and be quarantined, or our entire school shut down which I had all of those scenarios throughout the year, those lessons were available for anybody to access. So, like I said,

we had our iPads that if you were quarantined, or we shut down, we sent them home along with materials. And we did the same thing that we did the year before, where each one of us taught a lesson. We were responsible for teaching, you know, those five lessons for a whole week, posting it on a seat on the SeeSaw app, which is super kid appropriate. And, you know, kid, I don't know, it was easy for kids and parents to access and figure out what to do. And that is how we made it through the whole rest of the year, which was an interesting thing. Because you would have morning meeting, we would have kids that were, you know, remote that would come in on a Google Meet. So, you had some kids at home answering some kids in person answering, and any combination of that going on all year long. There's a lot of you know, pros and cons to all of that. But we made it work, we made it work. Other schools took some other approaches where they would have just a distance learning teacher that would take all of the kids in the room. But we decided that because we are a little bit tech savvy, we wanted to keep those kids in our own classroom. And it worked out pretty well. Now this year, coming into this year, where I think we're 55 days, I believe today into the school year, and we did not did not give give the option sorry, did not give the option of distance learning this year. We are in person right now. But if you get quarantined or you're waiting a test, we are not sending home the iPads this year, we're sending home paper things because we're hoping that you'll be back within two weeks. Now that could change if per se we all end up home. But at this point, now we're not sending iPads home. And we're not providing seesaw lessons were providing paper copies in hopes that we can stay in person.

### **JS 12:12**

Yes, fingers crossed that we stay in person. That's right. So, did you have a lot of students in Year to opt to stay for distance learning? Or did most of your students opt to come back to class in person?

### **MR 12:27**

I had two students that were strictly distance learning. And I really lucked out because their parents were very responsible and very, very active in their learning. They were always in the Google Meets, they always got their homework in. And that really made for a great experience for them. And we tried to have them, you know, on a Google Meet and, and watching science experiments and listening to books and talking with the kids in class. So, we had two full time distance learning teachers, but like I said, on and off throughout the year, different students who had to go and be tested or were waiting. They would, you know, be distance for a certain amount of time.

### **JS 13:12**

That's great. It seems like there's really been an effort to streamline this whole process. And it seems like it went relatively well, given the circumstances.

**MR 13:21**

You know, I feel like a lot of that had to do with being able to have one on one iPads. I heard of other districts that didn't have any devices and them having to rely on like their parents' phones and things is really tough. So, we were lucky in that sense.

**JS 13:35**

That's great. You might not know the answer to this question, but district wide, was there a lot of students that opted to stay home for distance learning or even in your building alone? Do you kind of know those numbers?

**MR 13:49**

I think it wasn't huge here in this building. I think every classroom had between maybe two and five per room like that were permanent or like that just opted to take distance learning. I think there were quite a few more in the high school. It seemed as though there would be you know, depending on different classes and things but I think there was quite a few in the high school I would say, you know more I wouldn't be able to put a number on it but definitely much more in you know, opted out of in person.

**JS 14:23**

That makes sense. Thank you. I'm kind of going out of order here because I love the way that this conversation is going. So obviously, this is our third school year with COVID COVID and a million different things to go into that. What would you say if there's anything that maybe you did the first year and we immediately shut down that you realize didn't work so well that you kind of shifted for year two and or maybe something that you kind of thought of that you implemented in year three, like what kind of what was different between each of the COVID years?

**MR 14:59**

Like the first time when we went out in March, we had just posted all the lessons onto a website. And that was a little bit of a struggle for the kids to give us feedback or to respond back to what we were doing. So, for the second year, we decided to use the app SeeSaw, which was better because we could post and then there was options for them to respond or draw. Or we could also

upload like a worksheet so the kids could actually draw on it or write on it so that we could actually see what they were doing. So that we learned very quickly was much better format. We also like with our reading, started out kind of videotaping ourselves talking, and found out that it got really, really lengthy for the kids to listen to us just talking, especially when they can't see us. So, we went to a more of like a Bitmoji [character icons from app, Snapchat] classroom, which the kids loved, because they already know about Bitmojis. So, if you can include that in class, and they could click around on a Bitmoji classroom, we had, you know, click on here for this book, and there was a picture of the book. So, they knew what they were doing. Or when they wanted to do their letter lesson, they clicked on the letter one, and it gave their letter lesson. So, you know, having a little bit more interactive, and letting them kind of explore helped out a lot. And it also helped out if we had, you know, we downloaded songs and things that they were familiar with, those kinds of things helped out a much more the second year.

### **JS 16:29**

That's great. So, something that I've heard a lot of education students at my university, as well, as my mom have said is that development, both like physically, as well as maybe emotional, emotionally, has changed quite a bit in the past three years. I want to start kind of with physical development. So obviously, using iPads, kids aren't having as much time working on those fine motor skills, like holding a pencil or cutting with scissors. How have you kind of compensated for that? And have you noticed a huge difference in that, or has it not been a lot?

### **MR 17:07**

Huge, huge, huge, especially this year, maybe not quite as much last year, but this year, huge, huge difference, I think, you know, with them being online a lot. Or maybe like with me teaching kindergarten, those parents not opting to send their kids to preschool. In the past, I've had maybe two or three children that never held a pencil or a pair of scissors before. Now I would say most of my class, I would say two to three maybe do know how to. I've never ever had a student that doesn't know what their name looks like recognize their name, I had a large portion of my class that had no idea what their name even looked like. So, when you would say, you know, "go to your cubby, find your name on your cubby", they had no idea what their name looked like. So, all of those factors are huge. I feel like this year, I'm teaching preschool, where in the past teaching kindergarten, you know, we just really had to dial back the academics. And just if you don't have your social and emotional and fine motor skills, there's just no way you're going to learn letters, you know, that's that's just never going to happen. It's not going to come along. They also don't understand compromise. They have no idea how to sit, I was reading a story and a little boy just got up and started wandering around the room. And he went over to play, and I said, "Oh sweetie, what are you doing?" And he said, "Well, don't really like that book. I don't want to sit here anymore. I'm just gonna go play," and I said, "Oh, no, honey, that's not how that goes." You know, like, they have no idea just like how a classroom works or how to walk in a line or, you know, they have no concept of what crisscross applesauce is, you know, come sit

down, sit on the floor, it's crisscross applesauce, and they look at you like, wow, you know, so you'd have to like demonstrate crisscross applesauce. And we're just really dialing back everything to like a preschool level. And, you know, we realized that quite early on in the year and we assessed the children the first week of school. And we all said, "oh goodness, these letters [the students were writing] is just not what we even need to concentrate on right now". So, it's a lot of just really taking a lot of time. Now winters here, they have no idea how to put on their snow suit. They have no idea how to zip a jacket. So, it's just all those basic things. And I think part of that is you know, parents were at home. And parents were on their own devices trying to work. And I'm sure having all their kids at home and trying to keep them occupied while they're trying to do work on mine. I'm sure it was a lot of, "Here, take this and go you know, you need to leave mom and dad alone." I need to do this. You need to go away. Or, "Hurry up quick. Let me do this for you." You know, so they they didn't in the past when they would have time maybe to show them how to do it or they were in a classroom setting preschool where they were showing how to do things. It was kind of like you got to get out of here. I have to work so parents would just do it for them. And they have no concept of how to do like self-help skills. So, it's just been a real change of you know what the beginning of kindergarten looks like. A lot of just take a lot of time, a lot of explaining a lot of reteach, reteach, reteach. But we have to meet them where they're at, there's no sense in trying to teach what we would usually teach, you know, because it's not going to happen. So, meet them where they're at and go forward from there.

### **JS 20:31**

Yeah, I really like that meet them where they're at. I'm kind of going off of that question of it. I know, standardized testing has always been a controversial subject in education. Do kindergarten students take standardized tests? Or is that later in elementary school?

### **MR 20:49**

We do in a sense, we don't take like what the, you know, the MCA [Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment] start, like in third grade, but we have like, our district does what's called a star test. We have a program and so the students are tested. And yeah, it was not pretty. It was not pretty. It was, you know, it was, but we anticipated that, and we just feel like, well, hopefully, we're gonna make gains come winter. And hopefully, by spring, will we have even more gains. But yes, we do take a standardized test. It's called STAR with a company called Renaissance. And it's three times a year. But we can also do progress monitoring throughout the school year. And we have been lucky enough to use our COVID dollars to hire teachers. So, we have a lot of extra support. For our students, which I think has helped a ton besides title, we've had some other checking connect, and a new social worker, and some other interventionists to help, which I think is really going to make a difference.



**JS 21:51**

That's great. So, you said COVID. dollars, did you get a grant? Or was that from the federal government or the state government?

**MR 21:58**

Yeah, honestly, I'm not exactly sure where each one of the allotments came from. But yes, we did. I'm sure that whatever we were able to get, we were able to, and I think also with us being a real school, we I think we were allotted some extra dollars. So that really helped out.

**JS 22:16**

That's great. So, it seems like you've had a lot of support throughout this whole endeavor of COVID-19. Would you say that your district as a whole has been relatively supportive?

**MR 22:33**

I think so I think, you know, some of the teachers that were a little less tech savvy, you know, they struggled at the beginning, but I'm watching my own two sons at home and seeing their work. And some of the things you know, of course, some were better at it than others. But I think everyone tried to do the best that they could with what you know, they were, their knowledge base was or what they were able to do in the time. Last year, my teenagers were able to do a hybrid option. So, they were in class sometimes. And I think, with science labs, and things like that, that really helped out. But I think that as a whole, especially in our building, we have had a ton of support, we've all helped each other, some were a little more tech savvy than others. And, you know, we tried to help out those that, you know, were struggling or configure something out, you know, we got together a lot and had a lot of great conversations about how different teachers were doing different things in their rooms. And I think that really makes a difference when you know that you can go to someone and say, Help, I want to do this, how do I do that? And we figured it out. So yeah, it really felt like a great community. And I feel like as a school, are building and you know, just speaking in our building, we're such a close-knit group here anyways, but I feel like something like a horrible pandemic brought us even closer together. So that was well positive from it. I would say, I guess.

**JS 23:55**

That's good. It's good to look at the positives. I kind of want to switch gears just a little bit. You mentioned being a rural district, which is kind of what I want to talk about now if that's all right. So, working in a more rural district has its challenges for sure. Just some data for you for the 2021 school year, two thirds of rural school districts in the United States reported enrollment

declines, and up to 80% of rural school districts reported substitute teacher bus driver and support staff shortages according to the US Department of Education. What have you seen to be is like the most frustrating aspect of the pandemic for the field of education in a rural school district and a rural area of Minnesota?

**MR 24:41**

Yep, we've seen a lot of those same things that you talked about, really a struggle to find subs [substitute teachers]. Subs has been really really hard. A lot of our subs are retired teacher, teachers, and they're a little hesitant the school be as they are and into a school where no one can be vaccinated, students can be seen to go places. They did not have any extra bus drivers to take those sporting groups anywhere. [Audio feed cuts out] Am I good? So yeah, those were definitely some struggles that we had.

**JS25:42**

Great, well, not great [laughs], but he got in a little bit or cut in and out a little bit there. So, I just kind of want to reiterate what I think you said. And you can tell me if I got it or not. So, a lot of the school substitute teachers that you employ in your buildings are retired teachers who are normally a bit older in age. And a lot of them were really apprehensive about coming into a building with a lot of students that were not eligible to be vaccinated, as well as school bus drivers having a shortage to take high school and middle school athletics teams to different sporting events. And that became a bit of an issue as well.

**MR 26:05**

Yes.

**JS 26:06**

Okay. Thanks. Just wanted to make sure that we got that. Have you seen an enrollment decline in your district at all?

**MR 26:32**

I think we have seen a little bit of a decline; I don't think it's been huge. This year, again, we did have a little bit of a decline because we are one of the only school districts in the area that is requiring masking. So, a few people in town have moved their children either to a private school

or a neighboring district that is not requiring masking, but I wouldn't say it significant amount of people are opted for that.

### **JS 27:01**

That is a great segue into the last few questions that I have, which all have to do with kind of dealing with the public, both as a parent of students and as a teacher, because you play both roles in this. You've got the parent hat and the teacher hat [gestures to head]. So, the first question is pretty general. And I think I already know the answer to this. But has there been a lot of pushbacks by the community and parents for your mask mandate at the school?

### **MR 27:30**

Yes. Yes, there has been a huge pushback. It's gotten to a whole 'nother level. That is actually, I guess, I would say, really sad. We had a large number of say, a large, I would say, it was probably between 20 and 30. People that were very, very angry about what would you call it protest out in front of our high school every morning. So, every morning, they would be out in front of the school with signs. And they did not have a lot of great manners, a lot of yelling and shouting at the kids, which I thought was highly inappropriate, my one son had to walk through the line every day, as they yelled at different things at him, you know, telling him that it's a choice, and he doesn't have to wear it. And, and, you know, we had a very open conversation in my house about it, and everybody wanted to wear a mask, and everybody wanted to get vaccinated. So, you know, we just tried to educate them to make sure that, you know, they knew, but those parents were quite belligerent, we do have some parents here that are not real happy about their student having to wear a mask, to class. And every day, don't send them with a mask, we're lucky that we have been provided a lot of masks. So, every day, we have to hand them out, and then there, remove them as they go home. We also have many that do not believe in the actual mask and want their child in a shield instead. So, we've allotted that, and as far as I know, there's only one student in our building that has gotten a doctor's excuse to not wear a mask or a shield. But yes, it's been quite verbal, they also have been not very nice to the teachers, they're very angry that we are enforcing the mask mandate in our building. And many of us have kind of been accosted out in the public for you know, enforcing that at our job. And yeah, they they're just, you know, they're angry and I get that, but I feel like there's been some lines crossed and I feel like a respect is kind of been lost, which is kind of a bummer because I feel like our town is really big on education and I feel like it's kind of put like a [\_\_\_\_\_] on that. And it's just too bad because the parents really don't want the children at home. They didn't like "homeschooling" [gestures air quotes]. And I say that with air quotes, because that's what they called it last year that they had to homeschool their kids. But then when our rule was that you could come back but had to wear masks, they didn't like that either. So, you know, we're kind of trying to give them the best option, and they don't like it, which that is their opinion. But there are other options. I always say, you don't have to go to this school district. And, you know, you do have other options. But, yeah, there's quite a vocal pushback for the masks in our district.

**JS 30: 41**

Yeah, that seems to be an unfortunate aspect of this pandemic that a lot of educators are facing at this point. Would you say that the protesting is more apparent at the high school level? Or do you have a lot of issues with parents at your elementary school level that are kind of doing the same things?

**MR 31:04**

I think it's, they never came to our building. And I don't know that they went to any of the other buildings but is definitely out in front of the high school. And I think the I guess what they were trying to prove was that the school board made the decision, and that's where the school board meets. So, I feel like they were trying to, you know, go against the school board. And that's why they stayed at the high school, which was great, because I think it really would have scared our little kids a lot.

**JS 31:34**

Oh, definitely, I would be scared as a high school student going through [that].

**MR 31:38**

My son wasn't too excited about having that outside the school every day when he walked out there.

**JS 31:42**

I do not blame him at all [laughs]. This might, I'm not sure if you feel comfortable answering this, and that's totally okay. But we've seen a lot of social media campaigns nationwide. And regionally here in Eau Claire [where] I am, about concerned parents, that are really worried that this mask mandate is quote, indoctrinating a lot of these children. Have you seen a lot of social media attacks on teachers in the school district as well?

**MR 32:16**

Yep, we have a lot of that. And even some of our parents [of elementary school students] have said things like that. And it's unfortunate that they believe that I don't believe that way. And, you

know, I don't want to wear a mask either. I don't want we none of us want to do this. But we also want to keep our jobs. And, you know, especially with us, like I have said a couple times already, up until a week or two ago, these children weren't able to get vaccinated. So, you know, they could carry it to us, or we could give it to them. And I just thought, you know, you want-- we want to stay as safe as possible. And the idea that it's indoctrinating them into whatever you think that we're trying to do here at school, you know, and especially at our level, we definitely don't put any of our opinion into, you know, we don't say, Oh, yay, your native or, you know, oh, this is good or bad, and they don't, and that that wouldn't even be part of our daily conversation, to me is just kind of, you know, we, I, my classroom doesn't know that I'm vaccinated. You know, it's just not part of our daily thing that we go through. But, you know, parents think that that is what we're doing here at school is that we're talking about it and saying people are good or bad, because they're not doing it. And, you know, there's really no way to to make them understand that they're not. So unfortunately, that's kind of where we're at right now. But what are you gonna do? [laughs]

### **JS 33:51**

Exactly, exactly. So, I've got a couple more questions. This is more about you as a parent of two middle and high school aged boys. So first, I guess I want to talk about athletics, because I know both of your boys are in sports, how has sporting events, bus rides, anything like that practices? How has that changed for your boys over the past 20 months?

### **MR 34:22**

Yep. So, Nicholas, who's in, whoops [Zoom feed cuts out for a moment] Nicholas is in soccer and hockey. As far as busing goes, they're mandated wear masks the entire time on the bus ride there and back. And that actually, just from the Department of Transportation really doesn't have anything to do with the school. Sure, we don't own our buses so it's a contracted thing. So that's actually their rule. They must wear masks the entire time. And then also, as far as in the past when saying forth between the two, if they needed say to pull up a player or maybe needed a player to play down because they were missing, that was not an option. Once you were chosen for JV [Junior Varsity] or varsity, you had to stay in that what we call pod, and you need to stay in that pod for the entire year. Soccer since it was outside, they did not need to mask while they were playing. But last year when we had not this past summer, but the one four that needed to wear masks. At the games, even though the adults were outside, we had to socially distance and mask while watching the game. The students did not have to mask to play hockey, we had to mask on the ice last year. And we were only allotted immediate family. So too, you got two parents for soccer it was for and for hockey, it was two, and you had to be on a list, and you had to be approved had to you know, tell your name at the door. And you were only able allotted so many people into the game because of the inside with the hockey. And they had to wear masks the entire time this year, because our hockey arena is owned by the city. And that by the school, there is no capacity. And they're not mad at mandating masks in our town. It's open for anyone to

come to hockey. So, we can have regular attendance at that the students are not need do not need to wear masks on the bench or on the ice. Then both of my boys are in golf. And that has just been if you're writing, you need to mask but obviously on the golf course they didn't have to mask.

### **JS 36:50**

Right. Okay, so that very different between indoor and outdoor sports, which makes sense. And that seems to be pretty consistent throughout everywhere, pretty much. In regards to their education, do you feel as if they still felt? I don't really know how to ask this, I guess do you think that they felt like they were still getting a quality education when online or in the hybrid model?

### **MR 37:20**

I think certain classes did a great job. Both of my kids are pretty tech savvy. So, they were able to maneuver around different things and get on, you know, different Google Meets and enter things and drop boxes. And you know, all the different and some of the teachers did it one way and some did another way. So, some of the hurdles that they had to overcome was knowing how each teacher wanted their things turned in, which was a struggle, at some times, you know, they would get a didn't, you know, missing and then they'd have to go back and realize that they put it in a wrong Dropbox, or they didn't turn it in the right way or something like that. But I feel like everyone really put forth a lot of effort to give some sort of a quality, you know, lecture or lesson to them. And it helped us that they were hybrid, and they went a couple of days a week, that really helped out as far as you know, like I said, with the different labs and things like that, being able to actually see their teacher, you know, and, and talk to them about different things. So that really helped a lot last year, I think having a hybrid situation for a portion of the year was a huge blessing.

### **JS 38:31**

That makes sense. Did you feel that your boys were able to stay on track with the distance learning are they able to kind of keep themselves independent working kind of regulate themselves?

### **MR 38:44**

Yep, they had to stay home on their own a lot. Because we were able teachers were able to come back into our building and teach from the building. So, they were home on their own quite a bit

was their biggest struggle, I think was that we have a lot of kids in our neighborhood. And they used up a lot of our available internet. So, I think their biggest struggle was not being able to get online quite a bit. And then when you can't get online, you can't email your teacher either to tell them that you can't get online. So, you know, they they eventually have their own phones and we downloaded Gmail so that they could, you know, email from their phones to tell you know, their teachers that they weren't able to get online but I feel like a lot of as long as our school is pretty good about as long as you reported that you weren't able to get online and you actually finished work at a certain you know, within a certain amount of time. So that's really a godsend their area and I heard of kids staying up till 11 o'clock at night just to be able to get on work done.

**JS 40:04**

Yeah. It seems like that has happened to a lot of students, especially around here around my university, so I can't imagine how difficult that must have been for them. So, I've got two more questions for you and then I'll cut you lose.

**MR 40:20**

Alright [laughs].

**JS 40:21**

So, the first one is kind of a general question. Are you personally optimistic for the future of education in a "post-covid" world whenever we get there? And do you ever think there is going to be a return to quote-unquote normalcy in elementary schools?

**MR 40:37**

Man, I hope so [sighs]. I think there will. I mean if you look back in history, my son is a big history buff like you are and you know he has looked back at all of these past pandemics, and you know it giving me hope that we will. We're going to return to what we think is normal. Now normal might look different than what normal was before, but I think we are already seeing a sense of normalcy this year just being in person every day is so much better than being, you know back and forth or whatever. Just having your core cast here, especially when you're trying to teach kindergarten, you know, has been so much better than, you know any of the other options. So, I'm optimistic that we are moving towards that. Now with all age kids, you know that we would service being able to have the option to get the vaccination I think it's going to get only better from here. I hope [laughs].

**JS 41:36**

That's great and your son is correct [laughs]. Looking back, historically, things should begin to get better but like you said, normal might not be what we think is normal anymore. Alright, so this is kind of a follow up question. And then we'll wrap up here, but in an ideal world, what do you want the world of elementary education to look like? While we're still kind of battling this pandemic? Like if money was no object, you could get whatever you wanted, what would make this pandemic experience for kindergarten students the best?

#### **MR 42:09**

I think being here, whatever that you know, means, you know if we could get everyone vaccinated, and that would really actually like cut down on so many reoccurrences or, you know, the, you know, in the past, even the protocol for what happens if you've come in contact with somebody has changed hugely this year. So, if the percentage of people would get vaccinated and get their children vaccinated, I feel like that would just open up so much, so many more options and having them in person and you're in school as much as is humanly possible. I would hope that something like a COVID would feel more like a fluke, like, oh, you know, they're gonna be gone for a few days, but they'll be back and then it'll be you know, great. It's not this widespread thing where you know, a whole classroom might get shut down. So, I'm hoping we've also learned a lot about how to use technology but not abused technology and how it can be a great resource for even five-year-olds to use in class. You know, we don't use our iPads like toys. They're it's a learning tool, just like a book or a pencil or a crayon in kindergarten, you know, I don't allow futures on it, but it's a great option for how you can receive information or how you can you know, get information and how you can also you know, respond. So, I think that it's been great. I hope that continues that teachers don't just put away, you know, the devices and put away all of the different options that they have already explored and say, well, it's over and we're only doing this now I think it has to be a great combination of both. So, and also, I think, just a great look at you know, the basics of social and emotional and the importance of that, you know, it's put a huge spotlight on that, especially for our younger students, but also when it comes to like depression and things like that for the older students not being able to be together. Hopefully, people will keep that in the forefront of, you know, an important thing to continue to [\_\_\_\_\_] and to, to, you know, keep aside because that is a huge factor in you know school. We're not just about academics here we're about all of the things so hopefully that will will also stay at the forefront of what is important.

#### **JS 44:47**

Thank you so much that has been really really helpful for all of this. This interview has officially concluded at 3:20pm. You will be able to find this interview at the western Wisconsin COVID-19 archive website, as well as Univer- Arizona State University and Indiana University's *Journal of the Plague Year* online archive of COVID-19 interviews, artifacts, and testimonials. Melinda, I want to thank you so much for meeting with me today and I really appreciate it appreciate your insights into the world of education and COVID-19. I wish you nothing but the



best and the rest of this school year and hopefully you're able to relax and kind of recuperate a bit over the upcoming holiday break.

**MR 45:34**

Awesome. Thank you so much, Jordan,

**JS 45:36**

You are so wel—

**MR 45:37**

And I'm honored-- I'm honored that you interviewed me.

**JS 45:47**

Oh, it was my pleasure. I think a lot of this early pandemic focused a lot on healthcare workers and people that worked in the public like that which is really important, but I think now we are realizing that the field of education deserves and needs to be highlighted as well because a lot of work has been done to help the younger people of the United States and that should be recognized as well.

**MR 46:10**

[laughs] Well, thank you very much.

**JS 46:11**

You are so welcome. Have a great day.

**MR 46:15**

Thank you.

**JS 46:16**

Bye Bye.