

Olivia Pecora Oral History, 2020/07/25

Interviewee: Olivia R. Pecora

Interviewer: Morgan T. Keena

Date: 07/25/2020

Location (Interviewee): Garden City, Idaho

Location (Interviewer): Nampa, Idaho

Transcriber: Sally Velez

Abstract: Olivia Pecora was born in Santa Monica, California, and moved to Salt Lake City, Utah, when she was eight. She graduated from Rowland Hall in Salt Lake City in 2014. After high school she attended Villanova University in Pennsylvania. While at Villanova, Olivia was active in her sorority, spent a semester studying abroad, and earned a Bachelor of Science degree in Psychology in 2018. Upon graduation, Olivia became a member of Teach For America, where she began working towards her teaching license. This journey placed her in Nampa, Idaho, and she became a teacher at Lone Star Middle School in 2018. She is a special education teacher with a focus on English Language Arts. In her job, she co-teaches classes, holds a resource class that is specific to her special education population, and manages the individual education plans (IEPs) of roughly 25 students. In her free time, Olivia loves to enjoy the outdoors, spend time with her friends and family, and explore the Boise, Idaho area. Throughout this interview, Olivia examines the impact of COVID-19 on the school system, her own life, and how she believes things will change going forward.

Morgan Keena 00:05

All right. Good morning, Olivia, or good afternoon. It's new now. Well, first of all, thank you so much for joining me for this interview today, I really appreciate it. I do want you to know, before we get started that this interview is meant to be entirely yours and to share your story and your experience with K-12 education throughout the COVID pandemic. So, while I'll be asking the questions, you're not going to see much of a reaction from me or anything like that. And it's not that I'm not interested. It's just that I want to make sure that you're getting the most natural reaction that you can. Does that sound okay?

Olivia Pecora 00:43

Yep.

Morgan Keena 00:44

Perfect. All right. So Olivia, we're gonna get started with some background questions surrounding, kind of COVID and who you are and what you do. So we'll just get started with what is your occupation?

Olivia Pecora 00:57

I am a special education teacher.

Morgan Keena 01:00

Okay. And in what city are you located in? Where do you work?

Olivia Pecora 01:05

I live in Boise, Idaho, and I work in Nampa, Idaho.

Morgan Keena 01:08

Okay. So what are your day to day activities look like?

Olivia Pecora 01:15

Well, currently doesn't involve much, but normally, I enjoy really getting outside. You know, being in nature, going on runs, bike rides, just being active in general. You know, meeting friends downtown, going, you know, having dinner with them and, and getting a drink or something like that. So just normal, normal activities like that, I guess.

Morgan Keena 01:50

Okay. In what ways are you connected to K-12 education?

Olivia Pecora 01:55

So I teach at a middle school, so I obviously, I teach sixth, seventh and eighth graders as my job.

Morgan Keena 02:05

Okay, What content do you teach?

Olivia Pecora 02:08

Ppecial Education, Language Arts.

Morgan Keena 02:11

Okay, perfect. So what were your initial thoughts when you started hearing about COVID-19?

Olivia Pecora 02:18

My initial thought was, this is not going to be a huge deal. I remember hearing about it being, you know, reported in China and getting really bad. And my first thought was kind of, you know, oh, there have been pan- there have been epidemics before. And, you know, nothing really serious has come out of it. You know, thinking back to like, H1N1, or even, you know, like Ebola, which never reached the US, but thinking about those associations that I had with disease, I guess. And not thinking anything like this could have come out of it.

Morgan Keena 03:04

Okay, how have your thoughts on COVID-19 changed since you were initially made aware of it?

Olivia Pecora 03:11

I definitely have taken it more seriously, since first hearing about it. As cases have gone up, I feel like it's been, you know, talked about a lot more and people as a whole are taking it more seriously. So definitely have changed, not really my stance so much as, as you know, changed my behavior, I guess and how I go about my life differently.

Morgan Keena 03:46

How was your daily life impacted by COVID?

Olivia Pecora 03:50

Teaching for one, I mean, going from working in a school to going to, to working at home and not being able to see students or co workers on a daily basis. And then just other smaller things as well not being able to go out to eat or to the gym or shopping, when I feel like it, you know, so just things you normally would take for granted are not feasible.

Morgan Keena 04:26

Okay. So we're going to move on to our next set of questions, kind of looking at the local response to the pandemic. So first of all, how was your employment status impacted by COVID-19.

Olivia Pecora 04:38

Well, thankfully, I'm still employed. I was not laid off. But as I was talking about before, going from working in a school to working at home, definitely changes the game in terms of education and how you can reach kids. So no change in employee And statis just the physical location.

Morgan Keena 05:03

Okay. How did your school district react to the pandemic?

Olivia Pecora 05:08

Our district, I feel like responded pretty quickly in terms of closing schools. When cases started being reported in Idaho, I think it was a few days afterwards that they decided to close schools in the district. So I think they responded pretty quickly. And we were wholly online for the rest of the year. And now they're, you know, in discussions about how to bring students back in the fall.

Morgan Keena 05:40

How did your state leadership react to the pandemic?

Olivia Pecora 05:43

I think it's kind of interesting for Idaho, because they were very quick to shut things down. And to go into kind of this, you know, state of emergency feeling kind of shutdown of everything. But then we opened really early, and that's caused a lot of cases to spike around the state. So I mean, Idaho was one of the last states to get hit with cases of COVID-19. And we were not one of the places that was hit really hard back in the spring, when you know, cases in New York were really were really high and other in, in other parts of the country. But currently, there's, it feels like, we're really slow to react now that we are getting hit with more cases.

Morgan Keena 06:41

Okay, so let's move into distance learning a little bit. And talk about that. So how did your district or your school specifically respond to the move to distance learning?

Olivia Pecora 06:53

Yeah, I feel like our district responded better than most, because we are a one to one district. And that made the move to distance learning significantly easier, just with kids having access to computers

already, that they normally take home with them. And then them being familiar with platforms that we normally use in classrooms like Microsoft Teams, they know how to access their email, they know how to, you know, get onto the student portal to use different, different platforms. So in that sense, it was easy. It was difficult, though, especially for special ed, to reach kids and give them the support that they needed, especially when those kids were not, you know, showing up. So I feel that the district, as in my school, as a whole did not was not super prepared for that reality. And I think it probably would have been impossible to be prepared for that. But that was the kind of just the response that had to happen.

Morgan Keena 08:08

So can you explain what distance learning looked like for you, and for your students? I know you have a smaller population that you work with closely.

Olivia Pecora 08:18

Yeah, so I, Distance Learning looked a little bit different just because I have one resource class. So that's, like a self contained, you know, classroom, just special ed students. So planning curriculum for them online, but then also, all the other students that I provide services for, are in co-taught classes. So it was difficult to find kind of the right balance. You know, obviously, it's difficult to co-teach when you're online, just for the reason that you're not there with the other teacher, they have their own curriculum, you know, planned out already. So that looks like a lot of support for, for kids overall. And then for my resource class. It was, it, I think I started out, really overestimating what was going to be possible online, for even for the kids who were showing up every day. And so I had to scale way way back on just the assignments that I was expecting them to complete. And, you know, moving from lessons that were broken into, you know, three or four different steps within that within that lesson to one or two small steps within the same lesson.

Morgan Keena 09:54

Okay. Can you tell me about some successes of distance learning?

Olivia Pecora 10:03

I think one success was the kids that I did communicate with, I think it really helped them to know that there was a teacher on the other side of the screen who was interfacing with them, and kids who, you know, came to virtual office hours. And, and, you know, we got to talk face to face, I think that was really helpful for, for those kids. And then, additionally, I think, at our school, we overall did a really good job, I think of sticking to a set of platforms that we were using for kids, and how we were communicating with kids was all very aligned. So I feel like that was also successful.

Morgan Keena 10:59

Okay, were there any drawbacks with distance learning at all?

Olivia Pecora 11:04

Yeah, well, as I mentioned, the, you know, it was great when you did see kids that you could talk to, but there were many kids who, who I didn't talk to at all, who I never saw log on, maybe a couple times, the first few weeks. And we obviously, you know, reported that and the school then got in talk- got in contact with them through their parents or something like that. So, but that didn't really resolve the issue

of them showing up and doing assignments, or even showing up just to check in with teachers, I would try and send you know, messages to check in every day, to students and and just like the groups that they were in, for each class, and some kids responded, but some kids never responded. So definitely a drawback not being able to know what's going on with your students. And difficult, I think, for teachers to understand why students aren't doing the work. There's obviously a lot that maybe is going on at home for them, that we just don't get to. We don't see that normally. But we're not seeing that at all now. Being You know, not able to have a conversation with them. So the communication was really, really difficult. You know, going going online, wholly.

Morgan Keena 12:42

Okay. Tell me about what it's like to work from home.

Olivia Pecora 12:47

Well, for me, I feel like it's easier than most I don't have children or anything like that, that I need to be kind of splitting my attention between. So definitely not my favorite things. It feels dull to me, and I don't enjoy it. But there definitely were no significant barriers. So I'm thankful for that.

Morgan Keena 13:16

Okay, so let's talk about moving forward, looking at your fall semester. What does your fall semester look like?

Olivia Pecora 13:27

Well, we don't really know yet. But currently, they're evaluating how we can do a hybrid model in all the schools in the district. So meaning half of the students would come two days of the week, and the other half of students would come the other two days of the week, Wednesday would be an online day. And so that is interesting hearing those discussions, because there are a lot of factors that go into making that possible, especially being in Idaho, where their cases are still rising. And, you know, we're getting over 500 new cases a day currently right now. And yeah, so that's been interesting to hear those discussions, just because I don't think the district really knows what it will look like either at this point, the school year still being over four weeks away. Talking about should we push the start date back. Some people are calling for the school year to just be fully online, or at least the fall to be fully online, so that cases have a chance to improve. So everything is very up in the air right now. There is no really assurance that that hybrid model is what it's going to look like. It could of course all change, depending on what the case is look like in a few weeks.

Morgan Keena 14:59

Okay. If the choice were yours to make, what would the fall semester look like?

Olivia Pecora 15:08

Well, if we continue the current trend that we're on in, in our county, where I work it, I would not feel super safe going back to school with 400 kids in the building. You know, even at that, that halfway mark, mark, our school normally has around 800 kids, they would be bringing back 450- 400 to, for that hybrid model. So that's kind of a scary prospect, especially having just taught summer school we had in person. You know, we were managing 50 kids who were required to wear masks and socially distancing

classrooms and sanitize. And doing that with 50 kids was really difficult. So I, I'm not super confident about what that would look like, for 400 kids, you know, even you know, if having 100- 150 on each grade job a day, I think would be really, really difficult. So I, if it's at that point, with the cases and it's, it's, it's difficult to want to say that you that I would go back, want, that I would want to go back in the fall, I would much prefer to see an online, start to the year if that's the case. And purely for the other reason of bringing kids back to schools will just accelerate this in our communities. We saw in summer school throughout the district, there were cases that popped up. And those were dealt with, there was never a serious risk. But that's going to happen a lot throughout the school year. So that's just kind of a taste of what's to come with kids going back to school in the fall. So at this point, if it continues, if cases continue like this and don't get better, I think it would be the right decision for schools to start online.

Morgan Keena 17:23

Okay, so you mentioned teaching summer school. Can you tell me a little bit more about what that looks like? What the procedures were, how that worked?

Olivia Pecora 17:30

Yeah, so our summer school program, we had five teachers and about 50 Kids rotating through those classes in in kind of pods. So the groups were anywhere from, I think about seven to 12 or 13 kids in a group together. So they remained in those groups all day and they just rotated to different classes. And in each class, they got hand sanitizer as they came in the door. They were sat six feet apart. And at the end, they were required to wear masks. As of the middle of the second week of summer school, the district started by strongly recommending kids wear masks to summer school, and the compliance rate was close very close to zero at most of the schools and so the district moved to requiring masks starting on Wednesday of the second week. And so for that for the rest of that second week, and and the last week, the third week, kids were required to wear masks. And then at the end of class students all got a wipe to sanitize all their materials, anything that they touched any shared materials, their desk, the keyboard in front of them, computer all of it. And then they got hand sanitizer as they left. And each group was dismissed separately to go straight to their next class. So there weren't any passing periods. There were no breaks where students could go, you know, get a snack. We did not have lunch filter or breakfast built into the schedule. So students grabbed their lunch and their breakfast on the way home from summer school ended at around 1230. So they took that lunch home, got their breakfast for the next morning. And I think that really all of these procedures. Some of them are doable for the regular school year like hand sanitizer and even for many classrooms you know, pushing the desks six feet apart is doable. But other procedures like having kids take lunch home with them instead of eating in the cafeteria, that will not be possible. So we've given feedback on how that went in summer school. And the district is kind of taking that feedback and working to improve their plans for the fall based on how those procedures went in summer school and how kids and teachers responded to them.

Morgan Keena 20:24

Okay, so your last question, then more still just looking forward into the, the fall and the spring and even beyond. Do you anticipate any changes coming to the education system or to your school? If so, what kind of changes like big, broad, little things?

Olivia Pecora 20:45

Um, well, I definitely think that the and this is not just in Idaho, specifically. But nationwide, I think there's going to be a lot of discussions about how teachers are compensated. And you know, how school districts deal with having teachers go to play potentially unsafe work environment every day, because teachers want to show up for students. But I think if they feel unsafe, that will be a huge, huge discussion that will have to be had and is already being had. I mean, in Florida, they sued. Teachers Union sued in the state of Florida for opening schools early purely because of that law that, you know, schools have to keep teachers and students safe. And you're not doing that if there is an infectious disease going around. So I predict that there may even be a teacher strike, it wouldn't surprise me and hopefully, what would come out of that is better treatment and compensation for teachers as a whole. Who are on the front lines of this now, as schools are opening, you know, back up. So I think there are a lot of teachers and staff who want to be treated differently because of that risk that they're taking for themselves and their families.

Morgan Keena 22:31

Awesome. Okay. Perfect. Well, thank you so much for your time. I appreciate your input on all of this. And thanks for going to work everyday with our kids.

Olivia Pecora 22:42

Thank you