

Interviewee: Cynthia Jensen  
Interviewer: Julia Jensen  
Date: 03/11/2021  
Location of Interviewee: Tuolumne County, CA  
Location of Interviewer: Columbus, OH  
Transcriber: Rev.com, with corrections by Julia Jensen

**Abstract:** Cynthia Jensen is a district secretary for a Superintendent of Schools office in a rural town in California. In this oral history, she discusses how the pandemic has affected her workplace, coworkers, family, and community, explaining her disappointment with the official response to the pandemic. She also touches on her experience getting the vaccine, and how she feels about the future now that there is a light at the end of the tunnel. Cynthia also discusses her concerns from the start of the pandemic, and how those concerns have shifted or grown throughout the past year. She hopes that moving forward, there will be better preparation for outbreaks such as this, and a stronger unified response from the general public. Looking to the next year, she predicts that it will take time for the schools to recover and find ways to best support students and staff.

**Julia Jensen:** It is Thursday, March 11th, at 7:20 PM, Eastern standard time. What is your name and what are the primary things you do on a day-to-day basis?

**Cynthia Jensen:** My name is Cynthia Jensen and I work as a district secretary for a Superintendent of Schools office in Tuolumne County, California.

**JJ:** All right. You answered my next question, which is where do you live. What is it like to live there?

**CJ:** Uh, it's a rural community, um, on the conservative side, um, it's up in the mountains, so there's a lot of trees and nature and not as much urban things, limited services available. And, um, I don't know how else to answer that question.

**JJ:** All right. No, that's-that's good. So this is very appropriate given that we're coming up right on a year. When you first learned about COVID-19, what were your thoughts about it?

**CJ:** Uh, concerns about-concerns for my mother, she's in her eighties, I'm very concerned because most of the serious cases seem to involve older individuals. So I was very worried. I was very worried for a brand-new grandchild who had just been born because they of course did not have any data on newborns at the time. And, um, that was my primary concerns was illness for other members of my family.

**JJ:** Have your thoughts changed at all since then, given that it's a year since it all started?

**CJ:** Oh, yes. And knowing that it was, that we did not take the appropriate measures to prevent the spread, that the direction from our government was misguided and incomplete, and we could have done a lot more to protect a lot more lives and save a lot more lives. And, um, that we were not prepared that because the pandemic response team had been, I don't know, had been

canceled, had been removed, no longer in operation. We were not at all prepared as a country to face this and the denial that was involved when it was coming and inability to address it with science was horrific for our country and for the lives that were lost.

**JJ:** Yeah. So you kind of answered the next question as well, which is what issues have most concerned you about the COVID-19 pandemic? Do you have any issues that concern you now that we're, we're a year out compared to, you know, when we did see the country's first response to it?

**CJ:** The resistance of people to try to stop the spread both through wearing masks, which has been proven to slow the spread and prevent the disease from spreading and the resistance to get a vaccine, which has been proven to be primarily risk-free and highly effective, that could also be used to give us back all of the freedoms that we are supposedly not getting, by simply saving lives.

**JJ:** Thank you for those thoughts. Uh, now we're going to move on to questions about your job. You already mentioned what it is that you do. Can you expand a little about how COVID-19 has affected your job?

**CJ:** Um, because I worked for the Superintendent's office, I am not in direct teaching role, but we are in the role of figuring out how to reopen schools, how to do distance learning with a very limited technology of our teachers, teachers were in knowing prepared for this, and we didn't have the infrastructure in place to support distance learning at first. So there was a huge learning curve. There were two sides of the teachers. There were the teachers that were very cautious and afraid to return, and the teachers who were more opposed to the restrictions that were in place. So addressing everyone's fears, in addition to supporting-I'm in a direct support role to a superintendent who was making all of the decisions with the board-the school board-regarding how to return safely, when to return, how to follow public health guidelines. So my job has been pretty much 85, 90% COVID-related for the last year of employment, reopening schools and students safety and just everything. So did I miss any part of the question?

**JJ:** No no, that was great. Thank you for that. So we do know that, as you mentioned, you've been working on this for the last year, so COVID-19 hasn't changed your employment status. But can you give an example of some specific duties that you've done that are specifically related to COVID? I know you said that you helped with some of the organization, was there anything that you specifically took on that you otherwise wouldn't have if you were in like a different role in the office?

**CJ:** I'm involved in the daily screening for all of our staff members and anyone who can come on our campus. So it's part of my role to make sure that everyone who comes on our campus is safe and that their temperature is taken and that they're symptom free before they have any interaction with other employees. And I have-or with our students primarily-which I have to do every single day. It takes an hour to an hour and a half of my time that I could spend doing other things, and also we do weekly updates. I'm in charge of making sure that those are all conveyed to all of our stakeholders so that they know. And then just the number of items that we address in our school board meetings. Um, the research involved in all of that. So anything-anytime that

spent on COVID is time that we're not spending on other things like student services, increasing education opportunities, training opportunities for staff, professional development, all of those things have been kind of put on the back burner while we just deal with COVID issues.

**JJ:** And since you're kind of the touch point for all of that, you really see how it plays out day to day.

**CJ:** Yes. Yeah.

**JJ:** Did you ever have concerns about the effects of COVID on your employment?

**CJ:** Um, well, no, only in the concern that I don't have direct contact with students. Um and, you know, I've been there long enough that other people, if we had lost money or funding would have been let go before me. I had options to work at home. I chose to go in and work in an office every day. So, you know, that continued my employment. And so no my job was not at risk during this whole thing.

**JJ:** Has the-

**CJ:** And when our schools were closed, I still continued to work.

**JJ:** Has the pandemic affected the employment of people that you know?

**CJ:** Well, there was quite a few cuts in hours for anyone who was in the service industry or restaurants or community was very badly hurt by this, you know, a lot of loss of bringing a lot of community support for our schools and in fundraising. And we can't reach out to those groups and we can't have other extra activities that used to be funded by our community because the community doesn't have the money or the resources to support these activities anymore.

**JJ:** Yes.

**CJ:** So in that way, you know, we saw a lot of people have lots of hours. But as far as directly, I can't think of anybody up here.

**JJ:** Going off of those concerns for cut hours and such. Did you have any specific concerns about the economy? I know that, like you said, you're in California, so maybe specifically the Californian economy?

**CJ:** Small businesses and restaurants have just been so badly hurt. Since Tuolumne County is primarily a tourist destination, we know some businesses have not made it through this without the tourism, and without the restaurants being open. So yes, it has definitely impacted the economy up here and we'll probably have very long-term effects of people leaving the area because they are no longer able to maintain their income.

**JJ:** That makes sense. How has COVID-19 affected you and your family's day-to-day activities?

**CJ:** Inability to travel is huge. We have family across the country and had definitely planned to visit them more frequently and have them visit us more frequently. But with the risks involved in air travel, that has been difficult. At the beginning of the pandemic and the shutdown, I saw my mother very rarely, which was very challenging, being an only child and the only family member-the only direct family members, she has, that was really hard, but the-not seeing the family across the country has been the hardest.

**JJ:** Yeah. How are you managing day-to-day activities in your household? Like, for example, I know that you got a dog not too long before the pandemic. And I know there's been a lot of jokes about, you know, pets getting used to their owners being at home. Have you noticed any sort of that activity changing?

**CJ:** Oh yes, absolutely. Got a dog, got to stay at home. My spouse ended up transitioning to complete stay at home, so the dog was not left home and my daughter returned from college to do distance learning. So she also was here to do dog walking. So we had a lot more people home day-to-day than we had anticipated. I was the other thing I forgot to mention was the daughter being home from college who had planned on being gone and thought it was just going to be two of us than a dog. So yes, we did get the dog prior to the pandemic.

**JJ:** How has the pandemic affected how you communicate with your family or even with your friends?

**CJ:** Well, at the beginning of it, there were a lot more FaceTime cocktail parties, but instead we've transitioned more to, um, outdoor activities, distance. We, the, the main kind of pods and groups that I socialize with are mostly vaccinated. So we feel safe in each other's company, but it's still been all outdoor or six feet or more social distance. But it's definitely cut back on the number of gatherings, the number of casual get togethers. I have friends in another County that I haven't seen for over a year because the infection rate is so much higher there and they are in a different state of mind as far as mask wearing and other cautions, so I don't feel safe going down there. So I haven't seen them at all. And cocktail parties stopped due to, um, political disagreements. And so unfortunately, those groups are no longer gathering even online.

**JJ:** So you've kind of touched on this already with not traveling, not seeing friends and some challenges at your workplace, but there, are there any other big challenges that you have personally faced during this outbreak?

**CJ:** Um, no. I mean, other than, I mean the biggest one is family. My daughter having to kind of lose her college experience, trying to look at things on a long-term plan instead of immediate, because things have not, I mean, things rarely go as planned, but they really gone off the rails, you know, missing a lot of the-missing live theater, missing live performances, running into people. So it, it, it does mess with your head, the, you know, the level of exasperations and impatience and exhaustion is horrific through this whole thing. The, you know, and, and dealing with like fearful staff members who are very fearful for their lives and their family's lives, and some of them are just, it's just really difficult to address that and be sympathetic to that, on all levels. So, yeah, there's something at every part.

**JJ:** Yeah. So you mentioned your cocktail parties, your distanced cocktail parties. What else have you done for recreation during this time to sort of pass the time?

**CJ:** Walking the dog. A lot of walking the dog, finding new places to walk when we can, it's harder to concentrate, so a lot of audiobooks on audible books, listening to books, as opposed to reading, it's harder to concentrate. So it's easier to do with that. Watching Netflix series.

**JJ:** Any books or shows that have specifically caught your attention?

**CJ:** Uh, just about every series on Netflix, The Queens Gambit. What else did I finish here? I just feel like we just, I just kinda run through series and find things to watch, you know, anything that was new on since between myself and family members and we subscribed to almost every single streaming service, there's a lot of options that, you know, are just being watched on iPads, not even on television anymore, but just on iPads independently. Way too much alone time. But we also traveled across the country, which is something we would not have done without a pandemic, in a car and a fifth wheel. So that made for a difference and a change.

**JJ:** how was that experience?

**CJ:** It was a fantastic experience. Surprisingly, I really enjoyed it really. I like seeing different parts of the country and how different things are done and different landscapes and, you know, seeing corn everywhere, corn in different colors everywhere. It was one color when we went out, a different color when we came back. It was a much slower pace, we felt very safe doing it. So that was nice. Once we got past the initial inexperience of traveling that way, it was a great experience. So, you know, we're doing that again. So that was something that was completely out of my comfort zone, but we really enjoyed.

**JJ:** Nice. So you did already touch on how the pandemic has affected your community, have you seen any people around you change their opinion during time or change their activities or, you kind of already touched on relationships, but has anyone kind of gone through a transformation around you because of all of this or during this time?

**CJ:** Well, yeah. I have a friend who really enjoyed hosting people in our home and on her patio and she's really had to cut back and I have seen a definite, um, she's more wary and tired from not-'cause she's very social. I've had other friends that are extremely social and they just look very weary and tired, from not having the interaction that they're used to and, you know, kind of feeling so much of their existence is based on being able to be social and host. And this has been very difficult and upsetting for them. So seeing that change, yeah. Ages people.

**JJ:** And this is going a little off script, but with the vaccine rollout, are you seeing that sort of emotion change? Is it uplifting spirits at all?

**CJ:** It's giving people optimism, I have a friend who has not seen her mother for a year and her and her mother both vaccinated, so she was able to see her. So I know that that cheered her. There's been a lot more discussion about getting together when everybody is vaccinated, and more planning and just feeling more freedom. So we won't be putting people at risk. It's difficult

though, because I work for a school, I was vaccinated earlier than most people, my age. So my socialization is kind of limited to either people who work for schools or people who are in the older bracket. So my husband is not vaccinated. So anything we plan socially, he will not be included in for awhile because he's not vaccinated and some of the other spouses as well, because they don't qualify because the community we're in right now is 60 and above, or, essential workers, agriculture, you know, schools. So until everybody kind of qualifies that socialization won't include everybody. And other people who delayed and waited, most of my friends have, have done it. I have a couple friends that are just getting their second chance in the next couple weeks.

**JJ:** How was the vaccination experience for you?

**CJ:** Very well organized, you know, amazingly so, the, my physical reaction to the first one was a sore arm. I was ill and out of sorts for about three days after the second one, nothing that was too much. I-I also attribute part of that to the fact that we haven't been sick for a year. So just kind of being out of practice of being sick was kind of odd, you know, feeling the effects more than we probably would have if we were just going through the normal course of every three or four months, you fight off a cold or flu as opposed to no one's been sick for a year. So, yeah, I had my shot on a Tuesday and by Saturday I was fine, and optimistic because figured it's better than getting COVID.

**JJ:** Yeah. So your physical health has been, you know, pretty, all right during all this, you did just mention that you haven't gotten sick in a year. How have you noticed your mental or emotional health shifting? Or not only yours, but the people around you as well? I know you touched on it a little bit with people being down, but is there anything else you'd like to say about it?

**CJ:** Okay. I have to correct you on one, some of the stomach-on some of the physical manifestations, I have stress issues with my stomach and that has flared off and on as things have been more challenging emotionally or when we've made major changes at the school or gone in different directions. So I wouldn't say I was completely not physically ill ever. And you know, and so, but mentally, yeah. And it's just you just down more, you feel more isolated. So yeah, there, it's definitely some mental health issues. And yeah, not going to the doctor and not having things addressed. I had a thyroid issue that wasn't addressed 'cause I wasn't going to the doctor. So, you know, now how many of those, you know, I've noticed that some of my emotional health has improved since they've changed my thyroid medication. So I don't know if that was also involved, but yes, it's, everyone is tired. Everyone around me is tired all the time.

**JJ:** Understandable.

**CJ:** Kind of exhausted. My husband is just kinda mentally challenged by all of this.

**JJ:** Yeah. Without naming any names or sharing anyone's identity, have you known anyone who has gotten sick during this time?

**CJ:** Unfortunately, yes. Right now I have a friend who is very ill. She is on a ventilator. Her health is improving, she's at 50% on the ventilator starting to breathe a little bit on her own, which is-this has just come so late in the game that it's kind of unbelievable. But as far as other positive COVID tests, we've had some staff members at the school where I work, who have been-tested positive, some were over it quickly, others, it was two or three weeks with lingering effects and lung issues and coughing. That-luckily the transmission rate has been very low at work because we require masks. All of the people who have tested positive that worked for the school have said it was just because they did not follow mask mandates or other things outside of work. But yes we did. But I also, I mean, for the number of days that we've been seeing each other daily, since October, it's kind of unusual that we've only had three staff members test positive, and most of them have gone in and been tested for some reason or the other. I tested when I got back from travel. Other people have tested because they've been exposed and everyone's been coming up negative.

**JJ:** That's good to hear. What has been your primary sources of news during this time?

**CJ:** I learned at the beginning of this probably last March or April to stop watching the news every day because it was causing so much anxiety. Every morning, every weekday I do listen to, Up First on NPR for my news. It's a 15-minute podcast where they do top-three top stories. I felt that was unbiased, some might disagree. I felt that was an unbiased and a quick overview of what was going on. If I wanted to look at something more careful, then I would look it up or Google it or research it further. But for the most part, I tried to stay away from the news because it was too, too stressed and too soon.

**JJ:** So from the news that you have observed, what do you think are some important issues that the media either is, or is not covering right now?

**CJ:** I think there's almost too much media coverage of everything. So, I mean, I, I feel that they're covering the vaccine rollouts, which I think are really important. I think they're doing their best to find unbiased information about vaccine. What's happening to people who are getting the vaccine so that more people will be trusting of it, but there's unfortunately so much mistrust of other side of whatever, you know, whether you're right or left, that it's very challenging to find news and information and get people to pay attention to it.

**JJ:** How have you noticed leaders and government officials either in your community or in your state responding to the outbreak?

**CJ:** Very disappointing locally. There's very little support of upholding mask mandates and main-and guidelines. The tier guidelines, our community is horrible as far as restaurants and things being open that they always want to go one step beyond what is recommended and then are totally dismayed and annoyed when we don't move out of a tier. So locally, I am disappointed of my community that we could have had schools open sooner. We could have had this taken care of quicker if people had followed the mandate. So that's disappointing that people don't recognize their own responsibility in this. As far as the state, sometimes I feel like Newsome goes a little bananas. He's our governor, talks too much does too little. I wished California had a more organized vaccine rollout. I feel they had plenty of time to prepare for that,

and they didn't. That they-I'm just, I'm really shocked at some of our communities and how long it's taken them to understand that this is an issue considering we are a liberal state. I felt we would be handling this much better than we are, and we're not. So maybe it's not politics. It's just people.

**JJ:** Do you have any thoughts on how your local and state leaders are responding compared to federal leaders?

**CJ:** Well, thank goodness the federal leadership has changed. So we're seeing a change in direction and a change in the way that these, these issues are being addressed. So it's so new, the new, you know, it's 50 days in office for the new president, so he really hasn't had a chance to make changes or he's been very optimistic and has been trying to encourage people. It will be nice if people notice that the previous administration has also had their flu vaccine and are following suit, but that's not happening. So yeah, I mean, considering they're both kind of liberal-both our state and our federal-we'll kind of see how that goes in line. That hopefully there will be less accusing and more uplifting and protecting States instead of blaming them or not helping where needed. So I'm optimistic about that, but there is so much spending involved. It would be nice if, when they try to get spending approved, it's the same as it always is. Them trying to jam everything into every bill. And so unfortunately there are things being paid for that necessarily aren't COVID related, but are jammed, I mean, we have the same thing everywhere. It's the same thing at our school, it goes all the way up. So it makes for an expensive and political issue.

**JJ:** Has your experience transformed how you think about family, friends and community?

**CJ:** Well, yeah. [Dog jumped on her] Sorry. It has, I mean, you know, you wish you had more time with everybody now and less restrictions and, um, you know, more physical contact than you're allowed. I'm not a huggy person, but I do miss that sometimes. You know, there's just other life events that happen at the same time. So it's kind of hard also to separate what is COVID-related and what isn't, other than the fact that, you know, family members-it's cut down a great deal on people being able to travel and be in contact and be in direct contact. I don't know how much of it would have been due to COVID and how much just would have been difficult to challenging travel due to costs and circumstances

**JJ:** How does this pandemic compared to other big events that have happened in your lifetime?

**CJ:** Well, because I wasn't, nobody directly related to me was very ill close to death or dying, I've had certainly much bigger events personally in my life. It's just that this one's gone on for a year, so that's been the challenging part, but I've been through the death of a, through cancer, with a close family member for 18 months. And this doesn't quite compare to that. So yeah, I mean, because personally we haven't been that affected other than making some major life changes, still could do worse.

**JJ:** So since we are a year out from the start of the pandemic, what do you imagine your life being like in a year or where do you hope your life is in a year?



**CJ:** Well, I don't know what the normal will look like since I work for a school. Of course, our primary concern in a year is going to be learning loss mitigation. And how do we help the kids recover both academically and mental health. And mental health has taken a huge hit for our kids this year. Um, not we still have some kids that are distance learning and haven't returned to "regular school" in any scenario. So we are looking at having to staff up more for both mental health counselors, more aides in classrooms to help with kids that are just going to be behind. And we have incoming freshmen from other schools that we don't know how this affected them for their eighth-grade year, but we know that every kid is now a year and a half behind where they should be, and we need to move those meters. How do you measure where kids "should be" because you can't measure it against previous measurements? So there's going to be a lot of emphasis on just kind of getting everybody comfortable with learning and where they need to be. And I worry a lot about kids just giving up because they've had a year and a half of this, and just, you know, kind of rebuilding, you know, kids didn't get to go to college, going back to trying to figure out what that looks like. So I think in a year my job will be a major emphasis, hopefully. I mean, as far as where I work, not me directly, other than, you know, dealing with more hiring and how do we pay for all that? And how do we pay for people right now? The government has promised us a lot of money, um, to kind of cover some of this, but at some point it's gotta be paid for. And what is that going to look like as far as where they're going to take it from, we don't have a money printing machine. So where do you take money from, to pay for the recovery from all of this? So that's a little concerning, but, um, other than that, I don't know what it'll look like in a year, but that is the major thing is because I'm so involved in education is how do we get everybody back on track and learning again? And we'd like them back full time and we'd like them in sports and we'd like them in plays. And can't really do plays with masks on. So we'd like kids to be able to play in the band. You can't play a wind instrument where, you know, you might have spit going to another kid and nearby, can't sing. Can't, you know, there's just so many things that we would like to have these restrictions lifted when it's safe so that kids can be kids and parents can not be as concerned about kids' mental health and be more enjoying the fun things that kids do.

**JJ:** Yeah. I think that that's a great thing to focus on for the next year. It's definitely going to be a learning experience. So knowing what you-

Speaker 3: Yeah. You'll hear the words, learning loss mitigation, as much as you hear your normal.

**JJ:** Yeah. Knowing what you know now outside of schools, what do you think that individuals, communities, or governments should keep in mind going forward for the future?

**CJ:** Be prepared for these things happening. You know, we have experts out there who predicted that this was coming, but unfortunately many of them weren't listened to. So I think people should learn from that, and not remove things like pandemic response groups that, you know, there's, there's just no reason why it took so long for people to figure out what was going on. So I think that's the main thing we need to learn from our mistakes, looking at other countries like New Zealand and Australia and other countries that have recovered so much faster because they just put things in place-in Finland and other countries, they just put things in place. Like, let's do

this. This is what we have to do. Suck it up for six months and you'll be fine, but there wasn't a lot of that. Sorry, dog just jumped in my face.

**JJ:** All right. Thank you for your time. Is there anything else you would like to say before we finish this up?

**CJ:** No. I mean, I, I look forward to things reopening and look forward to more, more of everything. Again, with people being able to gather and be safe and not be, can not be worried about health issues all the time and have other health issues addressed instead. I don't know if it's ever going to be normal. It's going to be new normal. Yeah.

**JJ:** Well, thank you for your time. This has been Cindy with her dog Luna.