

Kelley, Stephanie Oral History 07/24/2020

Interviewee: Stephanie Kelley

Interviewer: Alex Hinely

Date: 07/24/2020

Location (Interviewee): Carlsbad, California, USA

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Transcriber: Sally Velez

Abstract: Stephanie Kelley, a seventh-grade science teacher from Carlsbad, California, discusses her school district's decision to terminate in-person instruction, the implementation of distance learning strategies, and the future of K-12 education in the United States. As a nationwide debate over the effectiveness of distance learning ensues, Stephanie believes that technological platforms can be a powerful tool when utilized correctly. Stephanie shares how community building in the classroom at the beginning of the year helped establish higher levels of student trust and participation during virtual instruction. Beyond the classroom, Stephanie discusses her hobbies during the COVID-19 pandemic, including television, reading, and accompanying her husband to local dog parks. Looking ahead, Stephanie believes that schools in her region are not ready to fully reopen, citing a persistently high number of positive cases. Stephanie shares that public health officials should be listened to when deciding whether schools should close due to a pandemic. She also expresses extreme disappointment at the level of political interference in children's education.

Alex Hinely 00:00

Okay, so let's begin with what is your name and occupation?

Stephanie Kelley 00:27

My name is Stephanie Kelly, and I'm a teacher.

Alex Hinely 00:33

What are the primary things you do on a day to day basis? For example, your job, your extracurricular activities, etc.

Stephanie Kelley 00:45

I teach from about 7:30 Until 3:00 or so. I cook on a daily basis, take my dog on a walk to the dog park. Watch TV, read.

Alex Hinely 01:06

Where do you live? And what is it like to live there?

Stephanie Kelley 01:11

I live in Carlsbad, California. We just moved here. The weather's super nice. It's very, like suburbs. Neighbors are really friendly. We go to- we contact each other to go to the dog park. I remember when

we moved in, like people really wanted to invite us over to see their backyard and have dinner and stuff. So that's kind of like the neighborhood that we live in. Close to the beach. It's really nice.

Alex Hinely 01:46

When you first learned about COVID-19, what were your thoughts about it? How have your thoughts changed since then?

Stephanie Kelley 01:56

I remember, let me think. I feel like there was just like a lot of uncertainty. And I mean, it was call like, it's call like novel Coronavirus, because no one knows anything. And so that's very much kind of my feelings on it. And I just remember like when things started shutting down, I was actually in San Francisco with my sister for my birthday. And we were trying to decide if we wanted to, like go out to the bars and stuff. And this was like the day before San Francisco shut down. And I just remember like things feeling like they're up in the air like, do we go? Do we not go? And so there was like a lot of that feeling. And I mean, we ended up not going just to err on the side of caution. That's kind of how I felt about it, then like just a lot of like, do I do this? Do I not do this? And now I think like the guidelines are more clear. But I think it's interesting that things have gotten more political, because you kind of don't expect that when it comes to like a virus, like an illness, you don't expect things to be argued over. So that's the part where I think it's kind of baffling right now.

Alex Hinely 03:19

Switching gears to your employment now, how many years have you worked in a K-12 setting? And what emit- what initially made you want to work with children?

Stephanie Kelley 03:31

I just finished my third year. I started working in the middle of the school year with high school students. So I guess teaching. It has been like three and a half years for me. I think what made me want to start teaching. I've just always worked with students. Growing up, I was always involved the church with like the youth group, and then I became a leader in our church. So I kind of gave me exposure to it. And then a lot of like my part time jobs had gave me exposure to working with younger kids. Like I taught piano for a little bit. I tutored. And I think I just always liked building those relationships. I think it was just something unique to teaching. Like, you don't really get to build connections like that in other work places. And it was just interesting that I got to navigate, like different roles in teaching, I think so it wasn't like I don't think there was like a moment where I was like teaching as a job for me. I think even now, there are days where I'm still trying to think about like, do I want to stay in teaching? Is this really something I want to do? But I think as the years go on, I kind of am figuring out like, this is like I can kind of see my place in education. So, yeah, like, I think it's a relationship piece where, like, with high school students, I can, I saw myself a lot of times like navigating, like almost like a older, like friend, mentor kind of vibe. And I'm teaching middle school students now. And it's, it's like a different relationship. It's almost like I'm trying to navigate, like almost being another, like a different kind of parent a lot of times. And so I think building those kinds of relationships and figuring out my role has been like really interesting. And a part I really like about teaching.

Alex Hinely 05:46

Has the COVID 19 pandemic changed your employment status? If so, in what ways?

Stephanie Kelley 05:55

Do you mean like, Am I still employed, like that kind of status?

Alex Hinely 06:01

Yes.

Stephanie Kelley 06:03

So it hasn't affected me. So I'm really thankful for that I actually am just considered tenured for this year. And so I was able to keep my position at school. But I do know, a couple of teachers that were laid off because of the pandemic. So, it's been unfortunate.

Alex Hinely 06:24

What concerns do you have about the effects of COVID-19 on your employment and school funding?

Stephanie Kelley 06:33

Um, I think I'm not too worried about like my employment status. I think I feel pretty secure in knowing that I'll have my position. I think it's, I'm more concerned about how schools going to look for the foreseeable future. I think it's, it's really new for a lot of districts and there aren't necessarily programs in place. And so we kind of have to figure things out as we go. And when it comes to funding, I think I've never been one to like, worry a ton about it, but you kind of just hear things on the news, where there's been talk about, like decreased funding for schools that don't return in person, or there's decreased funding, because just different factors. And so that's kind of in the back of my mind, but it's not like, my one focus. And I mean, I just feel like teachers already spend so much of our own funds on education, that it's like, not a huge deal to me.

Alex Hinely 07:55

Did your school district close because of COVID 19? Who made the decision? And when did it occur?

Stephanie Kelley 08:05

Um, I'm, I think it occurred, like middle of March. And I'm not completely certain if they called, like an emergency school board meeting, or if the superintendent just made the call. But the decision came pretty quickly, because I remember we were in school that Friday, and the call, then, like, people started getting notifications of it. And I was actually out that day. And so I was just getting all the second information secondhand. But teachers was telling me that, because the announcement went out during the school day, like parents started to pull kids before the school day was over, and things like that. And so yeah, I don't know if there was like an official school board meeting or if it was just like an emergency one and the superintendent made the call.

Alex Hinely 09:10

How did you, your co workers, students and parents respond to news of the closure?

Stephanie Kelley 09:16

I think at first I and along with some colleagues were kind of excited about, like an opportunity to try something different. And I've always liked creating new things. And so I saw it as kind of an opportunity to try out something new. And so at first I was excited about it. I think kids kind of had the same reaction. Like they they kind of felt like, 'Oh, we don't have to go to school anymore. It's gonna be really cool. We get to be home. We get to do things on the computer' kind of thing. I think parents for the most part, the ones that I talked to you They're more concerned about how their students were going to access things. So they had all the our school had all the technology in place in order to do distance learning. But I think, from the parents perspective, they've never had to do this. A lot of them, a lot of times didn't have the experience of sitting with their student and having to look at different classes and different assignments. And so that part was kind of intimidating for parents. And we have a lot of parents that don't speak English. And so that was like an added barrier for them. And so I think that was kind of the initial reaction to it. And then as things went on, a lot of teachers that were initially excited about, like the opportunity to try something new, that excitement kind of just became, like just went away, because it was just really hard to get engagement, there wasn't a lot of accountability for students. And students kind of hated it after a while too, because they didn't get the they didn't get to interact in person with their teachers and didn't get to see their friends on a daily basis. And so it kind of just became kind of a burden for a lot of people and parents just really didn't want to do this anymore, because they think it felt like vacation, and they had to just be on top of their kids all the time or fine things for them to do on top of online work, because it wasn't mandatory for them to do things for school at that point.

Alex Hinely 11:44

How did the decision to terminate in person classes affect your job duties?

Stephanie Kelley 11:48

I think my duties remain the same, I think it's just a shift in how we did it. So we are still expected to provide content for students. But those guidelines that were presented to us were very, very loose. And so presenting content could have come in the form of me finding a video on the subject and just pushing that out to students. I didn't, and I wouldn't even have to make the video myself. I think for me, it was difficult because it felt like a lot of the things I was doing weren't necessarily standards aligned. And so that's kind of like a change in how the pandemic affected my duties. Like there's less of focus on the me make the curriculum that I'm pushing out to students standards aligned, and there was more of a focus on like, how can I make things engaging? Right. And so I was teaching science at the time. And so really all just picking anything science related, that could capture attention. And so I wasn't focused on thinking about like, what are the standards that my students need to hit for the rest of the year?

Alex Hinely 13:13

You should be responsible for making decisions about school closures. Explain whether you believe the decision should be made by local school districts, county offices of education, state officials, federal officials, or another agency.

Stephanie Kelley 13:30

I think when it comes to, like, do you mean school closure when it comes to like a pandemic or just school closure in general?

Alex Hinely 13:40

School closure about a pandemic lets say.

Stephanie Kelley 13:44

Okay. So I feel like specifically for pandemic like, I think it has to be a combination of things like it has to be. And I know they're doing this now, like public officials along with like the local, like the school board, and the Cabinet and the superintendent. Just because I think especially I think it became more clear that it's a lot of these things are so tied with politics. I think I'm just learning that more and more that like it's the decision has to come from, like a scientific and data driven perspective. I think that's provided by public health officials. And so I think, yeah, I think it's local and then public health officials, I think just because if it gets to it's like so far removed when we think about like the federal government making decisions for local schools, like they they don't see the individual communities they don't. And there are nuances for how something like a pandemic is affecting different communities, like some communities are able to open sooner, some aren't. So I think it comes down to like local public health officials, and the school board. And I kind of saw that because I, I, I like, for the first time sat in and listened to a school board meeting, and it was just interesting to see how, without public health officials their giving data, people are just arguing based on their opinions. And that was kind of not helpful.

Alex Hinely 15:36

How would you compare the effectiveness of distance learning to in person learning?

Stephanie Kelley 15:42

I think right now, when we look at what we did in March, starting in March, definitely distance learning is not as effective like very much, could be considered ineffective. But I, I feel like if we had a better plan in place, we have programs, we have accountability for students, if we start that way, I think it could be effective. Especially when we think about how we can differentiate for students and accommodate different needs, I feel like distance learning, as opposed to in person, I think distance learning has more room for differentiation, like I can push out different things to students, I can shorten some things I can, it's just easier to differentiate what I can. What I would almost feel like I could be more places at a time by giving different things to students. And so in that way, I feel like online learning does have a lot of potential, and I think we need to give it a good shot, because a lot of people are saying that it's completely ineffective. And that's true, the way we did it. When schools closed down it was because it was like everyone was in emergency mode, just trying to figure out what to do. But I think if we have actual structures in place, and we actually invested in, like programs that like certain charter schools already have partially homeschooled programs if we kind of adopted some of those things, I think we could be really effective online.

Alex Hinely 17:27

How has your school district ensure equal access to distance learning materials for students of all ethnic and socio- economic backgrounds?

Stephanie Kelley 17:39

I know our school has, when we shut down, they had a lot of opportunities for students to like pick up packets, if they didn't have internet access at home, they had a lot of counselors and teachers working on trying to get their families internet access for free and just so content contacting like providers to see if they would be able to offer those services for just a small amount of time for free. And I know that as teachers, we were doing a lot of like calling families and checking in on them. And so in those ways, I think we were trying our best to accommodate, but I, I don't I feel like there are ways that we fell really short of reaching some of those needs. Um, when it came to scheduling different classes and things like that, I think communication was really lacking. And so there was a lot of confusion about like, when are students supposed to meet with their math teacher? When are students supposed to meet with their science teacher? And so in that way, I think definitely there was like some students definitely had more access because they understood that and their parents were able to help them understand what was set forth and then some students just really weren't able to understand like how to schedule their days because they didn't have their parents didn't understand the communications that went out.

Alex Hinely 19:26

How has distance learning affected students academic progress?

Stephanie Kelley 19:34

I think things have definitely not come to a standstill, but it's definitely been stunted in a way for the past few months because the accountability piece for student was students was really missing. So a lot of them didn't have motivation, like if it didn't affect their grade. Or there were no negative consequences for not showing up to an online class. A lot of them didn't show up. So in that way, those students really missed out on learning opportunities. But even for the ones that did show up, I think so much of it was, like disconnected from the reality that I don't think they got much out of it. And and I know that not a lot of them. They weren't doing a lot of writing anymore. And when it came, I was teaching science. So when it came to science, they weren't able to do like the hands on collaborative investigations. And so I think they really missed out on the building those skills up more. So yeah, I think they did lose out on a little bit. In those months.

Alex Hinely 21:00

What have you learned about yourself, or your students through distance learning?

Stephanie Kelley 21:08

Um, I think I've learned that like, I really enjoy creating things in a way that gives students options and choices. And I think I've kind of learned that I really like like, it's just become became kind of enhanced that I love the relationship aspect of teaching, just because I depended on that so much, I depended on the rela- the existing relationships that I have with students to get them to show up on my online classes. Otherwise, they just didn't show up, right. And so I feel like I just kind of learned how much more than I value those relationships. And I think I also learned that in a way I want to, because I was able to start the year with them and had to end it virtually. It made me think about what are some things when we are able to be back in the classroom? Like, what are some things I need to really work on to build, like a stronger connection with students, because I think it was really clear that I fell short in some ways. When I thought I was doing well, because I thought I had a strong connection. But then some students weren't showing up. And I know that's not necessarily a reflection on me, but it just felt like I

could have done more. And I think when it comes to my students, they were so awkward online, I didn't and I didn't expect that because they're online all the time. They like make these Tic Tok videos for like the public to see. And so I thought they would be I don't know, I just thought they would be more open and animated. Like they would have fun being in like a virtual environment with their classmates. But they were just so like, shut down. It was it was like an interesting shift for me. And it might be a middle school thing, but it was just like an odd experience. And it just helped me see how like they can be one way in their social life and like with the internet and social media, but it doesn't necessarily translate when it comes to like education in the online space. Yeah, so it was interesting to see that about them.

Alex Hinely 23:44

So looking ahead, now, if the decision were yours to make, what would the 2020-2021 school year look like?

Stephanie Kelley 23:55

If there was no pandemic, and nobody was in danger of becoming sick, and ill, I would definitely prefer to be in the classroom. But as the numbers stand now, I think our district and a lot of districts around our area have made the right decision to just start online. But I think if it were up to me, I think it'd be really important to put to really invest in programs that would provide a lot of the structure that students need. And so I think districts have to come out with a very clear schedule for students. Just to give them a semblance of normalcy, right. So if they just like a normal day schedule, like from eight to nine, you're going you're going to have class with your math teacher like 9:05 to 10:05 you are going to meet with your language arts teacher, I think it's important to have those things in place. So it's not like a free for all again, like in March where like, check in with your science teacher whenever check in with your math because I think students just don't do well with that. And so if it were up to me and this school year wouldn't be fully online. But because it is I think I would make some strict schedules, like, put my foot down, teachers have to show up during these times for their students, students need to check in with these have to show up for the teachers classes during these times and make it like a normal school day where they're going to classes all the time. And they're going to have assessments, so we like invest in programs for assessments. Yeah.

Alex Hinely 25:54

What procedures, precautions and protocols do you believe need to be in place for schools to resume in person learning? Explain whether this is or is not plausible.

Stephanie Kelley 26:11

So some of the procedures, I mean, just the simple ones, like staying six feet apart with a mask on washing your hands frequently. I think that's like the bare minimum. And it is not feasible with middle school students to have them stay six feet apart, or keep their masks on for wash their hair. Like they these are just things like even just the washing their hands piece just doesn't come naturally to middle school students like they rarely are concerned with their hygiene. And just based on the ways I see them. Like, drink their water in class or share things with their friends, that piece is just going to be super difficult. And the distancing part is hard because they have to. I mean, there's just not enough rooms in a school for them to be able to be in small enough class sizes to be six feet apart. And then there's passing period. It's a mess.

Alex Hinely 27:26

So the final question, what lasting impacts will the COVID 19 pandemic have on the education sector?

Stephanie Kelley 27:37

I. Hmm, that's an interesting question. I, I feel like... I think I feel like at the end of this, if we're able to do some things, well I think we'll start to realize how we can leverage online learning to our advantage, like there are ways that we can maximize a student's opportunity to learn and have access to materials. Just a differentiation piece that we can use. If we can do it, well now learn that. I don't know, I would hope that a lasting impact is that like we as teachers, kind of just broaden our toolkit, like we're able to figure out different strategies that we can use in the future, when we do go back into the classroom. I, I would hope that because there's so much talk about how student growth has been stunted during this time where they haven't been able to be in schools, I hope that we start to value the role of education and the role of teachers a little bit more. And kind of appreciate that role a little bit more, which I think it is happening in some spaces. And I, and I feel like I feel like a lot. The parents and teachers are pitted against each other in this time. But I hope that like we are able to come out of this and see how parents and teachers are so like connected and need to work together to help students. So I feel like these are like a lot of hopes for what I would feel would come out of this pandemic. But I think it could happen if we are able to kind of navigate things. Well when we go back to school. In a distance learning environment in the fall, at least for me, that's what our district is doing.

Alex Hinely 29:58

Thank you for taking the time to share your story and contribute to history and to the archive.

Stephanie Kelley 30:05

Of course anytime.