

## FINAL CATHERINE CALDER

VC: Education has been turned upside down as a result of the pandemic, and teachers are on the front lines. We're here with elementary school teacher Catherine Calder, who teaches fourth grade at a private school in New York City. Catherine, welcome to the podcast. Thanks for being with us.

CC: Thank you.

VC: So just, let's start from the beginning. Why don't you tell us about your school and your student population?

CC: I work in the Bronx and I teach fourth grade. I have 24 kids currently and right now I have 12 that are in school every day and the other 12 are remote every day. So I teach both at the same time. And I've been working at the same school for the past 19 years.

VC: Can you tell me a little bit more about your students? Is it a diverse group of students?

CC: Mostly, I'd say white and Hispanic.

KK: So you began to teach remotely with Covid?

CC: Yes, last March.

VC: How was that change for you?

CC: In March it wasn't that great because we had to learn very quickly how to teach using Zoom and I had an old tech person help me out with that so he kind of walked me through all of that which worked out pretty well. But we already knew how to use Google classroom which was pretty good. We didn't use it all the time in the classroom but the kids kind of knew somewhat about it so it was trying to get them to turn assignments in and work things out with it. And a lot of issues were internet, also, because a lot of the students, well, what they say, you know, they didn't have internet or their internet wasn't working. And, some days the internet wasn't working so great in my house, so that was crazy.

KK: Does the school supply the students with any technology, especially for the remote learning?

CC: Yes, each kid was provided a Chrome book, but that was prior to Covid. Every student gets a Chrome book.

VC: So nothing once Covid started, there was no extra technology just the Chrome book?

CC: Just the Chrome book.

KK: Do you find that students are enjoying this remote learning? You've got two sets of students, what's the difference between the two of them, what's the dynamic?

CC: They don't like working from home. They like to see their friends and I hope to think that, the teacher too. And it's just a different setting also, being home all day, you know, could really-especially for a child because they need to move around. And they were out of their routine. I think a child needs routine also. I think they, the ones that are working at home, they've even said that they wish they were in school.

KK: How are the parents helping you out with the kids that are learning from home?

CC: Well, at the beginning of the year we had a Zoom meeting prior to all this where we met with the parents and the students and I just explained to them that this was the first time ever doing both at the same time whereas other schools, they have somebody who is working with kids remotely only, and working with kids who are in the classroom. We're doing both, and we're kind of thrown into that. And I just stressed that this is the first time so you have to be patient. And they understood. And I sent like weekly memos. In September, October, November, it was just like thank you for your patience. And I got lovely feedback too also.

VC: So that's great. Just so the listeners are clear on how your hybrid situation works, you have basically two groups of students and you have a camera and a monitor in your classroom and that's what the remote students are using.

CC: Yes. So I have the same 12 kids every day in school and I have the same 12 kids remotely. And then I also have a huge smart board in my classroom and then the Zoom allows you to share a screen and bring up all different materials that they're able to see. And they're able to share their screen back as well.

VC: Is it always the same group that's remote and the same group that's in the classroom?

CC: In my class it just happened to work out that way. But, I have one student who comes in Monday, Tuesday one week and Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday the next week. She's the only one. But other classes have kids coming in, maybe 5kids Monday, Tuesday. It switches. It just kind of worked out well for me because I just find that with one student coming in, then going home, they're constantly bringing their books back and forth, they're forgetting stuff, it doesn't – fourth grade is you know, an awkward age too. Responsibility is not always 100%. It's not always 100% in high school either. But they're bound to forget, and she has forgotten which I think is understandable.

KK: Now in the school itself, obviously there's half of the student body actually attending live. What has the school done to protect them? I'm sure you have Covid restrictions. What have they done?

CC: Oh yeah, we have so many. One of the first things is the different grades have different entrances and exits for going out of, that's one thing. We have somebody who professionally cleans and sprays, I guess every half hour throughout the whole school. And then we have

monitors that are working in the hallways to monitor, making sure there are not too many students in the bathroom. And then we don't have any kids going down to the office or anything for any reason, like that. We have to do that. So it flows very nicely.

VC: So that's good, so things seem to be running smoothly for you in general. Do you find that there are any conflicts between teachers and school administration and or students and school administration?

CC: I don't really see it with administration in my school. We're a pretty tight bunch. So no, I don't see that. Students and administration? I know that there are some students now that in some classes wanting to pull out. They don't want to be in school. Or some want to be back in school. And that's kind of hard because the principal is trying to maintain a certain flow of it all I guess until the principal feels that, you know, a certain amount of kids can come back in, we're keeping the number the way it is. The principal I think also doesn't want some of the kids, and it's mostly the upper grade kids who want to work from home and I think the reason is because they'd rather stay home and not do much because they're probably seeing that in class is more rigorous, I guess than being at home. Hence it's really the same but they have that, you know, 12-13 year old mentality.

KK: Do the fourth graders feel that way? Do you have a harder time getting the kids that are doing it remotely to focus while you're teaching?

CC: Well, you know what? I can tell because I can tell because, you know, you're looking at these kids on the screen so you can sometimes, they're minds are wondering or there playing with something, so I have to try and bring them back. So it's very easy to lose focus when you're on Zoom, but then again, you can lose focus when you're in the classroom too. Not everything is going to be entertaining all the time.

KK: I'm curious, when you are teaching remotely are the parents right there?

CC: Yes. I had one parent that was legitimately sitting right next to the student eating cereal.

VC: Oh, my God!

CC: Yeah, whether she meant to do it or not I don't know, but I also had some parents, you know, not realize that their kid's screen was on and they're half dressed in the background, younger siblings in the background. I guess it all has to do with space also. And then you have some that want to show their pet. I had one student who is bed. This was last year and I had to tell the student, "this is not acceptable."

VC: Do you have any instances where you get student that are, like, doing a little cheating when they're on Zoom?

CC: Yes. I had a couple of months ago, and I explained it to them and I even showed it on my end. The lovely thing about Google classroom is that whenever you assign anything there's a plagiarism button check. So I you're taking anything directly from the internet or from

whatever, it is you're posting it flags them. So it happened to one of my students and I tried to explain to the student on my end by flipping the screen and showing, and I don't think the student understood because he did it again.

VC: Do you think it's the concept of plagiarism that he had difficulty with?

CC: Yeah, I think so. I think they think, it's very easy to put something in your own words in kind of ... like for example, if we're doing something on Martin Luther King, and they read an article, and I ask when was he born or when did he die, and it's like he died on April 4, 1968 I think it was, and even though it's in their own words it's still posted there exactly how it is so I think that's what they don't understand. It's kind of a hard concept for fourth graders to get. But I tried to explain it the second time the student did it. I think he got it this time because it hasn't happened --- but plagiarism can be a hard concept to understand at nine years old.

VC: Yeah, I can see how that might be the case. Now teachers, you guys are essential workers in New York State. Do you regularly get tested for Covid?

CC: No. We do not. For some reason our school does not mandate that.

VC: Do you get tested yourself?

CC: I do. I try to get tested as much as I can.

VC: That's good. And to they do temperature checks?

CC: Yes they do. And that's another thing they do in the school. Temperature checks, the kids have to fill out a form that says if they traveled anywhere or the parents. There's some kind of app on their phone that they gave to fill out in the morning.

KK: And are they wearing masks and doing social distancing? And how does that work with lunches?

CC: Well, right now lunch is the classroom so everybody, there's only 12 kids and our classrooms are fairly large so they're pretty much all six feet apart. But at times, you know, I'm pretty sure sometimes the chairs scoot over a little bit.

VC: Yeah, so hopefully you're monitoring all of that.

CC: Yes.

VC: Has anybody in your school, teachers, students, and staff gotten Covid to your knowledge?

CC: Yes, a couple of the teachers did. This was after Christmas break, and yeah, so they were teaching remotely. The students were still in the classroom but we had aides working in there.

VC: As an essential worker, you are of the category to get the Coved shot. Have you had one?

CC: Yes. I had my first round last week.

VC: And was the school of any help in scheduling that for you?

CC: Yes, they showed us the link where we can get it and then we scheduled an appointment.

VC: What do you think your biggest challenge is in all of this?

CC: My main concern is that the remote kids are getting the same education that the five day in school. Meaning, I just hope, you know, when they take tests and they're doing their homework that it's them that's doing it, because in the end, it's only going to make things so much worse for the student next year. Because you can pretty much assess a student, how they're doing, but if they kind of started out remotely sometimes I have a hard time figuring out well, you know, is this kid, is this child getting a lot of help at home? You know, because tests, they're not supposed to be getting help but are they? I don't know. We're going by scout's honor here, so that's my main concern. And with that being said, the 5 day in-class kids, are they getting the same instruction too in a sense, because I'm also worried about the remote kids. So it's kind of like a ping pong.

KK: Is there a way for you to talk to each individual parent who you're teaching remotely, their kid, to make the aware not to help when they're doing the tests?

CC: Yes. We've had parent teach conferences and things like that and I always do a newsletter and I always remind them that the students should be working independently, that in the end you're going to cause more of a problem for your child in the long run. And it's so true, you know. A child who keeps on getting 99's and 100's and the next year they're not, then that turns into "my child was doing well last year," and it make it worse for the teacher too because then the teacher's going to hear they were fine last year, and all of a sudden this year, and then you throw in "yes," but your child was remotely then it can turn ugly, let's just put it that way.

KK: It's a difficult situation for the teacher and the students and the parents.

CC: Yes, for everyone.

VC: Exactly. You have situations where for the remote learners you've got everybody, the parents are working from home, the students, and maybe they have siblings and they're also, it can be difficult.

CC: It is, absolutely.

KK: And nobody's ever done this before.

CC: Right, and we were, it was just like, okay you guys are working remotely, good luck, you know? A little bit of guidance but I don't think anybody knew how to do this anyway, it wasn't planned.

VC: Everybody's learning as they go,

CC: Right, exactly. In a sense it's nobody's fault, we just learn by doing.

VC: Exactly. So what would you like to see happen post-pandemic, what's your biggest wish when this is all behind us?

CC: I would love two things. I would love to have, you know, I would love to see a major – what's the word – respect for what teachers do. And I really think that people are seeing that now. I would also like to see part of our pay go up. I don't know if that's going to happen, but it would just – just respect.

KK: You know, I was going to say that I think with all that's going on they're looking at teachers in a different light and they realize, the parents, remotely are realizing how hard and difficult it is to teach children. It's a gift. Not everybody can do it.

CC: Yeah, totally. And it's so much work as is, even prior to Covid. I come home, and I just don't put my feet up. There's constant grading and planning and grading and this and that. And then let's add the Covid and trying to figure out Google classroom and the Zoom and all of that and the technology. I mean technology is a blessing and a curse but it's also very scary to work with when you don't know. At the beginning of September I thought I was going to lose my mind, with the mart board, trying to get it to work, how am I going to do this. I really wanted to quit my job. But what helped me through it is that we were all, like, what are we doing? Not one person I knew was 200% confident and that was the great thing about it all. And our principal is really great too, because even he was like, look just doing the best you can. This has been thrown at us. So it's not like we had that pressure from our principal, which is nice.

VC: So yeah, so everybody's like, we're all in together.

CC: Yeah. And that's why I stressed it so much in September and October with the parents like at meetings and through my newsletters.

KK: Very difficult and this will enlighten some people to see what actually goes on.

CC: I hope so, yeah.

KK: Do you have any advice for the parents?

CC: Just to be patient, especially with your child because when kids are at home with their parents, they're definitely going to act differently than they are in the classroom. They're more like, I don't want to do this, whereas in the classroom, they're still in a kind of sense of fear of the teacher. I'm not saying in a bad way, but sometimes kids feel like they can get away with

things with their parents, but just to have patience with them because, you know, this is affecting them too, although they don't show it as much as I guess adults do. I guess they show it in different ways, and that we're all in it together.

VC: Catherine, thank you so much for being with us today.

CC: Sure.

KK: You've given us a lot of good information that I'm sure parents out there will appreciate especially.

VC: And other teachers as well, to know there not alone in this as well.