

We Raise NJ is working with our partner organizations to spotlight individual educators, students, parents, and leaders who are showing how #NJStrong they are with their resilient and creative support for students during this challenging time. We do not want to downplay the challenges our educators and students are facing but we feel that highlighting the stories and small successes of a few individuals who are making the best of this situation might be both uplifting and useful to other leaders, educators, and families across the state.



SPOTLIGHT:

KATHY ASSINI

*Sociology and Tomorrow's Teachers Teacher
Delsea Regional High School, Franklinville,
Gloucester County*

Strong relationships between educators and their colleagues and students and their peers helps turn vulnerability into growth.

Now in her nineteenth year of teaching, the 2014 New Jersey State Teacher of the Year, Kathy Assini, has had a full plate since this school year started. In addition to her role as a high school teacher for both sociology and Tomorrow's Teachers, a course for high school students interested in going into education, she works with disengaged boys during what she refers to as a motivational study. Kathy also acts as an instructional coach and a member of her district's professional development committee.

When reflecting on how she acclimated to the new teaching environment this year, it's clear she wasn't fazed.

"I like to think I'm tech-savvy. When I was teaching middle school in 2014, I was a tech mentor and tried to stay ahead of the curve. I was a huge proponent for using technology across my classes so that my students could collaborate even if they weren't in the same period, and they loved it!"

Her familiarity with tech has helped prepare her to pivot quickly between remote and hybrid instruction, but she has also continued to prioritize student collaboration so they could continue getting to know each other even in the digital environment.

“Students are more likely to engage in more meaningful dialogue about sociopolitical topics with peers they know and trust. At the beginning of the school year, I made sure to allocate time to relationship-building to help them identify who they’d like to engage with in working groups throughout the semester. I sent out a survey to help create my groups. I use Google Calendar invites to set up their meetings during class time. This allows me to jump in and out of conversations. It’s pretty cool!”

Kathy credited her district administrators with helping teachers ease into the digital environment in a way that met them where they were.

“My district has been one-to-one since 2015, but that doesn’t mean everyone was using technology in the same way. So, when we had to go all remote, my district grouped/tiered teachers based on their comfort and familiarity with technology. They also paid teachers to attend technology-focused training in the summer AND turned teachers into tech mentors at the school level.”

Kathy is a firm believer that this combined approach alleviated a lot of judgment.

“I think having people on-site who you feel comfortable sharing technical issues with makes it easier to troubleshoot because you’re less afraid to be wrong. It’s a “we’re all in this together” mentality, and when you have that, similar to students, you’re more willing to take instructional risks and have a higher reward.”

Her advice to others is to embrace being vulnerable. She claims it’s what’s helped her navigate this experience, and if anything, it’s made her students feel comfortable giving her feedback on how she presents material, and even to be blunt when she’s on mute (she’s not the only one).

“Don’t be afraid to ask questions or try alternative methods to accomplish the task at hand. You may not get the answer you want, but in hindsight, it’s probably the answer you needed.”

We Raise NJ commends Kathy, and her students, for taking the time to build meaningful relationships that safely enable vulnerability. Cheers to learning and growing together to stay #NJStrong!