

Interview with
CARRIE WEBB

April 18, 2021

**THE PANDEMIC YEARS: COVID-19
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION**

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Carrie Webb was interviewed by Tom Webb on April 18th, 2021 at her home in St. George, Washington County, Utah. She talked about how her occupation as an elementary school teacher changed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, and teaching in 2020.

TW: Would you like to give some background on your experience as an educator before we get started?

CW: I began teaching in 2003, in Alpine School District. I've taught elementary school grades one, two, and three, and I have spent most of my time in Washington County at Title I schools – at Heritage Elementary, and currently at Panorama Elementary. And I teach third grade right now.

TW: Can you define Title I for us?

CW: Ah, Title I is a classification of schools where— I believe, it's seventy-five percent, I'm not exactly sure on the cutoff is, but the district has control over that— where most of the majority of our students are low socio-economic families, and so we get extra money so we can help bridge the gap with more teachers, more aides, and para[professionals], supplies, and programs.

TW: Nice. So, the students that you're working with, on average, in your classroom, there's probably more students that are more severely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic than other demographics.

CW: Than other schools, yes. Yes. Because a lot of these families don't have technology at home, besides their parents' cell phones or a television. But they don't have, like, computers or Chromebooks or iPads, or things like that, where they can do online schooling. So, the district would check out Chromebooks to the families, but then that would be one Chromebook, and there could possibly be two to three or four students all trying to do their work on that one Chromebook. So yeah, it has impacted them a lot.

TW: So, when we switched, when the pandemic was declared, and we switched from in-person learning to virtual learning, can you describe that shift and how you finished the rest of that 2020 school year?

CW: It was right at Spring Break, and we knew we were gonna have— we had a feeling it was coming, so we were all trying as teachers, and my third-grade team, trying to figure out Schoology, because we hadn't really taught with it before. We don't really do much of that in elementary school, online learning platform. And so, our spring break was spent learning how to upload assignments, how to make videos to upload to the Schoology accounts, getting kids practice. We had practiced before they left, because we had a feeling that we weren't coming back, and so we had them practice logging on so we

knew they knew their logins, their email addresses, and things, so we could at least have that go smoothly. And then, it was all a matter of what were we going to do? What are we gonna teach? How are we gonna teach? Are we gonna just review concepts? How to talk to the kids? How do we see the kids? It was just a huge learning curve. Luckily, I work with a great team and we seemed to do better than some others. I know our lower grades, second, first, and kindergarten, basically stayed away from Schoology and did packets, where the parents would have to come and pick up packets every other week and run off papers. But we managed to do it through Schoology. We planned all kinds of events just to try to engage kids, to get them back on, because they thought they were out of school! “Ah, we’re not going back to school! It’s after Spring Break, we’re done!”

It was really disappointing to see how many kids never got online. Probably, well, the majority didn’t really do anything online even though we were online every day. We were setting up individual Google Meets with them and their families, and trying to see them every day. We were calling them, we were texting them, we were going to their houses and dropping off things at their doorsteps, and we spent hours trying to stay in contact with the kids. Then all of the sudden, it became that we didn’t have any personal time. Our school hours [laughter] became 24/7, it seemed like, because we would get phone calls at night from parents. And then we would get phone calls early in the morning, and there was just no boundaries after a little while because we were all so rushed, we gave out our personal numbers and that was a mistake, instead of having them just use our email. But, everybody was scared, so we wanted to be there for people. We worked hard.

TW: Can you describe what demographic of children struggled the most? You talked about students not logging on or having difficulty being available.

CW: The kids that really struggled the most were the ones that the families were struggling the most, where both parents were working and there was no supervision at home, so they weren’t getting on. The children that had at-home parents or at least one parent that was at home, they were logging in and we were able to do more with them. So, of my class last year, I guess it would have had to have been seventy-five percent didn’t consistently log in. But I had five or six kids that logged in every single day, and finished everything, and did everything. But, by the end of the year, it was down to about one child finished the last activity we had. We thought it was a fun activity. It was an *Avengers* thingy, with the glove? [Laughter.] And they had to earn jewels. I had one kid finish it and he sent me a picture.

But we did a lot of things. We did a *Harry Potter* week virtually, where we had online dissections of owl pellets. We did all kinds of —We did fiction and non-fiction during that. We did owl studies. We did just a lot of fun things, herbology and talked about plants, and just put it all into a *Harry Potter* format. We made videos, lots of videos of us dressed up and going on and we would deliver things to them.

We did a Mothers’ Day poetry book, because they were going to be gone for Mothers’ day and some people think that’s the school’s job, is to have a Mothers’ Day gift. So,

how are we going to do that? We taught poetry and they made a book for their parents and moms, while we were teaching them poetry, that we delivered to them. It was a lot of work, harder than being able to just teach in your classroom.

TW: Was that typical, when you talked about the decrease in participation? Was that across the school?

CW: Yes. Uh-huh [affirmative], yeah. There was, it was— and you were taking roll, but you weren't taking roll. It was not even just across the school, but across the district, there was a lot of lower participation. We kept trying to find kids. They just all of the sudden would disappear because you couldn't get ahold of them. And so, yeah, it was a worry. And we're paying for it this year because they didn't do anything at the end of the year, and then if they stayed virtual at this year, the beginning of this school year and they stayed as a virtual student, made that choice, it's very low attendance there, too. Sometimes you are getting a kid who hasn't gone to school for over a year really, and they have lost all that learning. We've had at the end here, several kids coming back from virtual and they are at least a year behind their peers, and that's because they haven't done anything on the virtual end.

TW: So, how do you respond to that as a teacher? Can you spend extra time or resources with those students that stayed virtually, or is that on themselves?

CW: We don't have any extra time or any extra resources to do that. What we do is we try our best to prioritize them and work with them the best. But right now, you know, we're at the end of the school year and we have RISE testing coming, which is the end of year [testing]. So, we can't drop everything and go help and spend a ton of time with the kid that just walked in, and then not get your other kids ready for their RISE testing. You have to really figure out a way to do both at the same time. You teach one kid how to read who doesn't have their letter sounds in third grade, and then still get kids ready for the really rigorous RISE tests. It's frustrating.

TW: I can imagine. What would you want parents and other concerned citizens to know about teaching in a pandemic?

CW: [Laughter.] Give the teachers the benefit of the doubt because we gave the parents the benefit of the doubt. We got good really quick in this situation. 'Cause a lot of us had enough technology-savvy to run websites and programs and all that kind of thing, but nobody had ever taught online before and that's a whole different way of teaching because you are not able to connect as easily with each kid through facial expressions because you are on a screen. I said more than once, "Take the computer off the trampoline and sit down." The kids loved it 'cause they would pick up their Chromebook and they'd take you for a walk through the house and show you everything in their home, every pet, everything they've drawn, because they were excited to actually see their teachers and things. But it's a whole new way of teaching, so we had to learn. Luckily, the education world gave us tools like Scholastic, A to Z Readers, and Razz Kids, all these big people that run these education programs, they offered 'em for free. And it was

lovely because then we were having ways to say, ““Kay, get on Razz Kids and read your books,” and they were leveled for the kids. Then you were able to get some really high-quality non-fiction texts and things that engaged the kids, and that helped out a ton. This year, they weren’t free but you knew what you wanted to use, and it helped those virtual teachers. But you didn’t know how to grade; it was all a learning curve, it really was.

TW: Do you anticipate that there is anything from teaching in a pandemic that will be utilized moving forward?

CW: [Enthusiastically.] Oh yeah! We use it this year a lot. We still use the Schoology, which is like Canvas at the University, but it’s a little bit easier for younger kids. So, we use Schoology as our platform, and so we have a lot of our testing, we have now made ‘em online tests, that we use there. We have assignments on there that the kids do, homework can be done through that way. We still like giving them a hard copy, you know, a hardcover book to read. But they can also write in their book reviews through Schoology and Google Forms. We have links to all of their online programs that they use, such as Lexia, and Redbird, and iReady, and Imagine Learning. So yeah, it has given us another way to, and there are a lot of kids that like that. And we like it too, because it helps us teach them responsibility. We live in a higher tech world, so these kids are gonna be way ahead than, like, you were, maybe we could say, when you went to high school. These guys already know how to make their Google Slides presentations. They know how to put together a Google Form and answer Google Forms. So, they’re gonna be a lot more tech savvy. I think it’s gonna be a great advantage. It was a hard thing to learn, but there has definitely been some good things that have come out of it.

But we’ve also learned that we need to have in-person learning. You still need to have that ability of a teacher to turn and monitor how things are going and change things up super quick. You can’t do that online. But in a classroom, if you can see they’re not getting a concept, such as equivalent fractions, then you can hurry and pull out the tiles or the counters, and it can all of a sudden become a hands-on thing, which a lot of kids need that concrete. Online? Sure, you can give them virtual manipulatives, but it’s just not the same. Good things have come from it, yeah.

TW: Good. Aside from the pandemic, we saw a lot of other issues coming into society. Did the Black Lives Matter movement ever get brought up in the classroom?

CW: It did. I actually have an African American in my classroom, and it came up. But it more came up as the kids didn’t understand why it mattered. Because to them, it doesn’t. Everybody’s a kid, and everybody’s in their class. Luckily, we have that kind of classroom. But it did come up, so we had some conversations about inequality and racism, and as we talked, we taught Civil Rights a little bit through Ruby Bridges, of course, Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King [Jr]., and others. We studied their lives and other people, such as Jackie Robinson, Mae Jemison, and just really just tried to show them some great role models through Black Lives Matter. And a lot of kids didn’t understand why we were only singling out Black Lives Matter, and so we had to talk about priorities. Like, we know all lives matter, but right now, this is a situation that we need to put more

emphasis on. Not necessarily that nobody else matters, but right now we need to try to figure out this, so that maybe we can learn from it and so we can spread it other places. So, talking about it that way was a little bit easier for them to understand.

TW: All houses matter, but the house that's on fire, your neighbor's house, takes priority.

CW: Yeah, exactly. That kind of a idea.

TW: Did students ever bring political opinions back that they learned from their parents? How is that handled?

CW: [Major emphasis] All the time! This year, especially, has been a very politically active little third grade class, and I had kids on both sides. Now, not kids, because we talked about it, their opinions are coming from what they hear from their parents. We had conversations. They would try to say things, and, you know, the pro-Trump side and then there's the pro-Biden side, and they're going back and forth. And I finally had to say, you know, "Until you're eighteen, and you're having a vote, then we're not here to talk politics unless you can give me a good reason why." And so, we started having conversations about the ideas and what's the purpose of certain things, and so then we could kind of talk about it on their level. But yes, we had all kinds of parent feedback. You could hear it all the time. In fact, there are two little girls who have ruined their friendship over it, 'cause one was so pro-Trump, and one was so pro-Biden that they don't talk to each other anymore, right now. It's the most I've ever had.

And we do this thing in our class called "Biography Bottles" where they research anybody they want; they can be alive, or they can be dead, just somebody that inspires them, or things like that. I had one little girl's mother call me and she said, "She's adamant that she wants to do Donald Trump." And she says, "Is that ok?" And I said, "That is fine as long as there's facts in it and it is not opinions. The report can't say, 'President Trump's the best president in the USA, and I think he's the best, and I think this, and I think that.' It needs to be factual; so birthdate, timeline, business dealings, those kinds of things, legislation he enacted, whatever." And she said, "Okay." I said, "If you could get her to talk about somebody else, that might be better, but I'm not going to censor her, so fine." She came back the next day and she did Hellen Keller instead.

TW: Better choice.

CW: Better choice. That was a good move. But it was bad. But they're fine now. They were all— Election day was a hard day for a few people because they just brought it from their home. And they're like, "My mom's going to be so upset." So yeah, these nine-year old's pick it up.

TW: So that makes it important, that what gets said at home is something that should be said, because things get taken from these kids.

- CW: Yes. And in fact, at parent-teacher conferences a lot, or when we're talking parents through a situation that may have arisen, and we've had to talk to parents, we basically tell them, "I believe twenty percent of what your child tells me, if you believe twenty percent of what they tell you." Because I don't think parents realize what their kids tell their teachers. We hear a lot of stuff. And most of it's got a grain of truth to it, I'm sure. Kids sound just like their parents. When you meet their parents, it's kind of funny. You can be like, "Oh, that's where that came from," or, "I can see why your child is so organized," or whatever.
- TW: So, from teaching through a pandemic, a lot of people online, on Facebook and other social networks, have said that teachers have been undervalued up to this point in society. How do you respond to those people that say teachers are undervalued?
- CW: I think that if they're just realizing now what a teacher does, then they just weren't aware of the situation. Yes, I could see why people say teachers are undervalued, but I don't think a teacher would say they are undervalued because, as a teacher, you already go into it knowing that you're not gonna be the glamor shot, but you're there to help kids. And you should be there for the kids. But yeah, a lot of people all of the sudden realized their babysitter was gone, and they're like, "Oh!" And then they're trying to understand homework, and then they're realizing that they weren't in tune to their kids' learning. So really, I think when they say teachers are undervalued, I agree to a point, but I also think they're saying that because they realized that they had no clue of what was happening in the classroom. So, it opened eyes, which was nice.
- TW: I'm glad. Just a few more questions. Have you received the vaccine or plan to receive it?
- CW: Yep, I was in the first group because I'm older and because I was an elementary school teacher, so I got vaccinated very early on.
- TW: So, describe that decision to get vaccinated as a teacher. How did that decision come about, taking into account your occupation?
- CW: Well, I walk into a school with twenty-five kids that live in twenty-five different households, and I don't know how many people live in that household. So, you start really thinking about each kid has two parents, maybe, or brothers and sisters that go to schools, they go to work, they go all over the place. And then, that one kid's coming into class, times twenty-five, it was a little scary at first. And getting kids to wear masks was kinda hard, but they've actually done very well this year. They're getting a little tired of it, but we'll make it through. The vaccine just gave me a better feeling of security because, you know, of all the kids we teach.
- TW: Mm-hmm. I think we are pretty much getting to the end of our time. Is there anything else that the general public didn't see from your perspective, as a teacher in a pandemic, that you would like to address in this interview?
- CW: That the general public didn't see—

TW: Or any other closing thoughts?

CW: I think the biggest thing that people haven't been able to see that teachers are seeing, is the effect on the kids' emotional well-being, and the effect that it's had on some of the families. They are so tired that they've kind of tuned out a little bit on their kids more. So, we're seeing kids who have lost the desire to learn, through this pandemic. I think that's the biggest problem we're gonna see for the next few years, is that that year break for some of these kids and the six, seven months that everybody had, they just stopped the pattern of going to school, summer break; okay, it's school again, summer break. And they lost the desire to learn and so we've got a lot of helplessness out there, and it will take us a while before we get all the kids back on, "I want to learn," and seeing the importance of school because, right now, some of them don't see it. That is the biggest problem that I see. I know that parents are tired of homework and parents are tired of being engaged with their kids in school, 'cause it does take a lot of energy. But we need it. We need them to re-engage so that their kids will continue to grow. So that's my biggest thing. We all had to do hard stuff during the pandemic— but we need 'em back.

TW: Wonderful. Thank you.

CW: You're welcome.

TW: I think that's a great place for us to stop, but I appreciate your time and your willingness to do this. I think that there's gonna be a lot of insights that future readers will learn from this as they study the Pandemic Years, getting this perspective from an educator, so I appreciate that.

CW: You're welcome.

[END OF RECORDING. END OF INTERVIEW.]