

Mihir Joshi:

Welcome to The Spark: Medical Education For Curious Minds. We present the people and stories behind medical advances at UCSF, from medical students to physicians and faculty in the school of medicine. Through The Spark, we share the innovations that we hope will bring more equitable and better care to our communities.

As you can hear, there's some new voices hosting this podcast. I'm a Mihir Joshi and my co-host is Daniel Cummins. We're both medical students here at UCSF taking over for Tessnim Ahmad, our incredible last host who has moved on to residency. We're both incredibly thankful for all the work Tess and others have done and are excited to take this podcast forward.

We're truly excited to enter a new chapter where we get to explore the contemporary issues facing medicine and our UCSF community while bringing in the voices and minds of some awesome people who make UCSF so special. Today, we're starting off with a tale of two re-openings, an exploration of the challenges of reopening medical school here at UCSF, and reopening schools across the country.

Daniel Cummins:

In our second piece on school re-openings, I first speak with doctors Tami Rowan and Alan Shindel on what it's like to be both parents and physicians during COVID-19 and the impact that has had on their children's education. I then speak with Honey Kim, a local teacher from San Jose that has dealt with implementing remote education. I think each of their perspectives offer a lot in the way of understanding both what remote education has been like for parents and teachers, as well as what returning to in-person education may look like. Our first interview has a few Zoom era glitches as well as children piping in, so please forgive that. And with that, I hope you enjoy these really interesting conversations.

Dr. Tami Rowen:

I'm Tammy Rowan. I'm an assistant professor in the department of obstetrics, gynecology, and reproductive sciences. I'm in the division of obstetrics, gynecology, and gynecologic subspecialties.

Dr. Alan Shindel:

I'm Alan Shindel. I'm an associate professor in the department of urology. We're married. We have two kids, ages five and two.

Dr. Tami Rowen:

I don't know if this matters, but we have another kid on the way.

Daniel Cummins:

So I imagine that the balance between education and childcare and healthcare is something that you guys have been dealing with since your children were born. And now it's kind of a different flavor of that balance. Do you want to just talk about what the last few months have been like?

Dr. Tami Rowen:

Sure. I think that there's a combination of both being physicians switching from in-person care to telehealth, and then also parents switching from having a kid in school and children that can go out to other things and do other outdoor/indoor activities to having basically everyone being in the house. I

think that was the biggest transition initially. In March when the preschool shut down and we started seeing more patients from home, it meant that basically we are having to learn how to, just professionally, from a patient care point of view, learning how to do patient care from our homes and getting adjusted to that.

But then also knowing that our son couldn't be in school and was home all day. And trying to give space to a childcare provider. And we were very, very fortunate that we've had the same childcare provider since our oldest was three months old. But my son wasn't used to being home all day, the little one wasn't used to having him home all day, and the nanny certainly wasn't used to having both of them all day, and also unable to really go anywhere. Not go anywhere, but there's a lot more limitations on where they can go.

Dr. Alan Shindel:

The challenge for Jacob was that he lost his structure. Loss of structure [inaudible 00:03:57] an impact upon all of us, but I think for young children, especially, it was incredibly disruptive.

Daniel Cummins:

I can imagine it's been tough for Jacob, especially. What was his schooling like before COVID and post COVID? How are you managing that?

Dr. Tami Rowen:

So he was in preschool. He was in his last year of preschool and they were very kind of focused on kindergarten preparation. They were teaching the kids, helping them recognize letters, teaching them kind of how to sit and do work and really prepare them for the skills they would need for kindergarten. And that all was stopped, obviously. They tried to do Zoom activities, and it was very, very hit or miss. It's very hard as a parent to want your kid to do any more screen time. Jacob, also, it wasn't good for him. He couldn't focus on paying attention to his friends and didn't really... It was exciting to see them for about a minute on screen, but it was very clear that this was not going to be something that he would be able to engage with in any meaningful way, which was fine because he could be home and we could do other activities.

So in the transition, he's supposed to go into kindergarten. And originally we, even before COVID, had planned to put him in a small, independent kindergarten with 12 to 15 kids in a class. And that school was running summer camp programs. And we were able to actually enroll him in a summer camp program. He loved it and asked everyday if he could go. He was very happy to wear a mask. Everybody was very, very careful and cautious, and the plan was for him to start kindergarten at that school. But then there was a statewide mandate that any county on the state monitoring list was not going to be allowed to open any school, including independent schools, even ones that could potentially socially distance.

So that was a very big blow to us and our planning and our thoughts of what would be best for our son. Meanwhile, we still are enrolled in a public school just in case something happened with the independent school, and we got the schedule and it became clear that the only thing they're doing in kindergarten is two 30 minute Zoom classes every day, which would be completely... He would be incapable of paying attention to those 30 minutes Zoom visits, or classes. They wouldn't be beneficial to him in any way that I can really imagine.

Honey Kim:

My name is Ken Kim, but I go by Honey. I'm an English teacher in San Jose. This is my third year teaching and first year doing this distance learning teaching.

Daniel Cummins:

So do you want to just tell us a little bit about what that's been like the past few months? I know your last academic year was interrupted around March or April, and you had to go online. What's that been like? What was that whole process?

Honey Kim:

Last year was just a lot of confusion. I think especially because this is very new. It's unprecedented. So even teachers who've been teaching for decades are having to kind of create a new curriculum for themselves. So last year it was kind of just figuring out how we would even approach distance learning. And this year it's a little bit more regimented with everyone being able to use platforms like Zoom and other ed tech tools. So yeah, it's a little bit more nuanced this year.

Daniel Cummins:

And you guys have any idea, the plans right now, on continuing remote education versus when you're going to go back? Or are you totally in the unknown right now?

Honey Kim:

Yeah, so we have this four step plan that's supposedly in place. So our phase one is just full distance learning, which is what we're doing right now. So there's no one on campus, although campus is open if you need to go pick up textbooks or something like that. And then phase two is for the most vulnerable populations to be able to go back in school. So for people who aren't able to really distance them from their houses or for some specialty classes, like our special ed classes who benefit a lot more from in-person learning, just to have those few students be back on campus.

And then phase three is supposed to be the hybrid approach where we have rotation of students on campus and out of campus. But that one is kind of more confusing just because we don't have any plan of how that would really work. And then phase four is in-person instruction. But they're saying that probably wouldn't even be a possibility until after the vaccine is completely widespread.

Daniel Cummins:

Yeah. I can imagine that's going to be a while, as we can all probably imagine.

Honey Kim:

Even still, then, like just the idea of how to get students to all be able to be vaccinated, or if that would be a requirement, it's kind of like up in the air.

Daniel Cummins:

You mentioned kids that have special needs and I'm sure this is something you've probably seen and given a lot of thought to. Different kids are affected disproportionately by this. Is that something that you've seen? The resources that different kids have or parents have?

Honey Kim:

Definitely. We're trying to be able to provide equity by providing hotspots for students who don't have wifi, or Chromebooks for students who don't have access to a laptop. But even still, through virtual teaching, I'm able to see that some students, they're not even at home. They're in hotel rooms or they're just not able to even access wifi anywhere. So they're not able to be online.

And a lot of students have home responsibilities now that they are at home, taking care of younger siblings. Or just having a really loud environment around them isn't as conducive as if they were able to go to school and have a proper school environment. So definitely that's an issue. And there's also students who have the special accommodations needed. So, like IAPs or 504s, which are basically just documented extra needs. And some of those needs aren't able to be met through distance learning. So for some students, like if they need to be testing in a quiet room by themselves and they're not with other students, that's not really something we can accommodate right now. So some things are just kind of being put on the shelf, too.

Daniel Cummins:

As a teacher, obviously you're seeing the effect in the classroom with accommodations and things like that, that you just mentioned. Do you have any thoughts on the other resources that schools can offer to kids, especially younger school-aged kids, like free food or reduced cost lunches and childcare resources during the day for parents that work? Is that something that you've talked about with other teachers or giving you?

Honey Kim:

Yeah. At our school specifically, we do provide lunches every day. But that's also kind of a struggle just because if we're mandating that they're online to be pretty much in class all day, it's hard for them to leave and then go pick up lunch and come back and still be on for all of their classes. And I think a big worry that all of us teachers have is how much, other than teaching, that we're there for the kids. Just being there, emotionally, to talk them through social issues that they're having. Or to be there if they like have family problems, or just anything that they have are having issues with.

Like last year, I discussed with you that I had one student had a lot of health issues. And so, being virtual and not knowing any of these kids, and they're all new this year, I just have this perpetual worry that I don't know what's going on, and I could easily miss something that could be really detrimental to them. So it's hard to say that schools should be responsible for all of that. But if there were some sort of way where schools could be providing more emotional support for these students who are going through a hard time, especially if their families are being impacted by the COVID crisis. If they had to have sick family members, or if any members are losing jobs and going through this economic crisis, to be there for them in a way that's not just academic.

Daniel Cummins:

Yeah. It's great to hear that at least the school is able to keep providing lunches to kids who need it. That's great to hear, even though it sounds like there's some hiccups with that.

Honey Kim:

Right. We're trying to support them in every way possible. Although, there are a lot of obstacles with that. Even with contacting students' families, we have these different programs where we can access translators and have them be on as well. And all of us teachers have live office hours where we're just on live, and people can just pop in at any time. So we're trying to be able to provide spaces where they can pop in and get support.

Daniel Cummins:

There's sort of this other conversation going on in different parts of the country, in different parts of the state as well, on trying to push going back to school. So you mentioned, sort of circling back, but that four-part plan, is that at the local school district level? Or what level of administration is that?

Honey Kim:

That's where we have in our school districts. So in our county, the districts kind of all have their own plans. But county wise, we kind of just are on the state watch list. So Santa Clara specifically, we're still on the watch list. So within our state, depending on if you're on the list or not, you could go back completely if the district chose to do that.

But I think safety should obviously be the first priority. And I hear a lot of policymakers talking about, like, if only 1% of students would really be at risk, or there's a low percentage of staff would be at risk. That still matters though. I don't think that it should be said that because there's a low number, then we should just be able to go back and those people will just suffer the consequences for that. I don't think that's fair. So even though distance learning is definitely impacting education and it's definitely harder for students to be able to get the same education that they would have in-person, the safety and the health of the students and the staff is more important than that.

Daniel Cummins:

And obviously there's lots of data that's emerging, and we still don't know a lot of things that need to be known about COVID. But a lot of data seems to support that people of different ages and kids of different ages are at different risks, both for contracting it and suffering from the illness, as well as transmitting it. And at least at this current point, there's data to support that younger kids are a lot less likely to suffer ill effect. Although there have been examples, really tragic examples. But they are at significantly lower risk. And then also at much lower risk of transmitting COVID. Is that something that you've talked about with any teachers? Or has anyone put forth the idea that maybe different grade levels could have different policies? And then also, younger kids might benefit from going back much than older kids that are probably more able to do remote learning.

Honey Kim:

Right. I know they're a lot of daycare programs that are still running and operating, especially for parents who are essential workers and they can't take care of their kids at home. But I still just think no matter the risk levels, if there's still a lot of risk, and there is, that chance that people could be getting sick and other things could happen to them, then we should try to mitigate that as much as possible. Especially because, students aside, there are also teachers who are quite older and a lot of staff workers who are older as well. And so even if we did a system where only some students are on campus at a time, to trust all those students to keep their masks on the entire time, especially younger kids, it's hard to imagine that they'd be able to do that. But also just for teachers who are there, like in one room constantly while kids are circling in and out, it'd be kind of hard to imagine that would be safe for everybody.

Daniel Cummins:

Yeah. Yeah. There's definitely some safety risks. And whenever you go back, if not everyone, not every single kid is vaccinated, and not every teacher's vaccinated, it's going to be difficult to have a risk be zero.

And that kind of goes into something that I talked about with the husband and wife at UCSF that are both faculty, and they also have younger children. They had the opinion that if, essentially, schools open up, there's always going to be a risk and you kind of take that risk with the influenza, with the flu, with pretty much any illness. There's always a risk whenever people are coming together and that the risk is never going to be zero. So they were really encouraging that there needs to be more thought and going back as safely as possible. And she also mentioned that the main concern really is from teachers that are worried about both their own safety and the health safety of kids.

At least my perception is that there are some pediatricians and health professionals that are saying there's never going to be zero risk. And so there's going to come a point where we have to go back to school. And then the teacher side of things, at least from their perspective seem to be, we want there to be zero risk before we go back in it. It seems like there's just a little bit of disconnect between perspectives here. Do you have any thoughts on that?

Honey Kim:

Yeah. I feel like the big reason for that is just because there's so much misinformation and there's a lot that is still unknown about COVID. I think if there were more knowns and if there were a specific vaccine, like there is with the flu shot and stuff like that, then people would feel more comfortable with it. But because it's like, you just see news of death cases rising and you don't know exactly... There's no cure or there's no vaccination. It just seems like there's so much that's not known that people are scared. Right?

I think even when we do go back, it's just, like, the trust that there will be drastic measures taken to ensure the safety of everybody, just making sure that happens. Like even now for my district, if we want to go teach in our classrooms, we're able to do that. And the way that they screen for that is just for us to fill out a form that says, basically, I'm not sick. And if that were the case for... If we actually go back in person and all we have to do is fill out a form that says I'm not sick, I wouldn't trust that to be a measure of knowing that everyone is getting tested, or knowing that everyone is not actively having COVID right now. So I think if there are measures put in that specifically targets these things, then people would feel a lot more comfortable going back in person.

Daniel Cummins:

And I know you said that your school district, it's sort of going to be a vaccine or nothing before at least a full opening happens and all students return. From your perspective, and the perspective of colleagues that are teachers, other than a vaccine, what things would make you feel comfortable going back to class? Would it be everyone's tested regularly, or those types of measures? I'm sure people have different opinions as well.

Honey Kim:

Right. I've heard a lot of people say that, some districts, are saying that enforcing a mask is impossible or something like that. My district hasn't said anything like that. But I think definitely things like that, where there are protocols where every student needs to wear a mask at all times, people need to create the social distance, even within a classroom. I know they said they put hands sanitizer in every room. Just having all these things, like temperature checks maybe, or having people COVID tested, I think would be a really good thing. Especially because now it's not really available through a workplace or anything like that for schools.

So I think having those in place would be a lot better, and before going full in person. So they're not saying that even for people to be on campus, we need to have a vaccine. But for us to resume like it

was pre COVID, then there'd have to be a vaccine. I think most likely we'll probably just be doing the hybrid system, and that maybe the school culture will change to where hybrid is the new norm. And there's just less people on campus at one given point.

Daniel Cummins:

That makes sense. I know there's, across society, there's still a lot of fear, and until there's a vaccine and it's probably going to be the case. Are there any resources? I know you mentioned, obviously, more testing, and, of course, a vaccine, once there is a vaccine that works and is safe. Are there any resources right now that you feel like you're lacking that would help in remote learning? Or once you do go back?

Honey Kim:

I feel like that's maybe the biggest thing about distance learning, is that ed tech schools are fairly new. I don't think that they've been as developed as other technology programs. So for instance, in my classroom, I use a variety. I use Google Classroom, Pear Deck, Jamboards, Zoom. Even with some of my classes, we make Discord channels, so we can kind of talk that way. So I'm just trying to get as much engagement from the students as possible.

But one of the main things is, for public schools, we're not able to enforce that the students around the cameras for a lot of districts, just because of privacy regulations. And so, teaching and then seeing a bunch of blank screens is really difficult, especially in engaging conversations and discussions. So even in creating smaller groups where students are talking to each other and being able to facilitate those conversations, it's definitely not the same as being in person and teaching through nonverbal cues and those kinds of things.

So I think if there were better development of ed tech tools and maybe more variety in that, that'd be really helpful. And also, the schools being funded to be able to provide all of those programs. Because a lot of us teachers, we're just using free trial programs and registering a bunch of emails, or trying to just get away with using the free version that has less tools available to us through the different platforms. If we were able to be funded to have all of these things at our expense, then that would be a lot easier, too.

Daniel Cummins:

The new phrase, essential worker, or essential business, has been thrown around a lot. And it's so obvious to me, the more that I talk to people about this topic, the more I think about it, how so essential education is for everyone, for the future of society, and even just right now. So many people have children and so many people are involved in education that it's amazing we don't pour more resources in general.

Honey Kim:

Right. Especially in that first, for teachers, we get a yearly allotment of funds that we can use for our personal classroom. And this year they allotted us a third of what we got last year, because the reasoning is basically that because we're online, we don't really need to like put things in our classroom. But it seems like it should be the opposite, where we're teaching something that's completely new and we don't have access to a lot of these things that aren't funded by the school. So it really doesn't seem like education is being prioritized as much as it should be.

Daniel Cummins:

And I know that a general trend is that people are happier in their work when they have more freedom and more ability to kind of be creative and work as they see how they should. I think that's an unfortunate thing when you don't have the resources or ability to be creative as a teacher and provide in the ways you feel like you could.

Honey Kim:

Right. Just especially knowing how hard it is for students to sit for 90 minute periods, just at a computer. And they don't even get like the social break of seeing the other kids during breaks and lunches and stuff like that. Knowing it's really difficult for them, but then also still wanting to keep them to that high academic standard and not letting them just slip through the cracks because of the pandemic. It's hard to find that balance between just being understanding and understanding of the situation versus wanting them to still succeed and be prepared for the future.

Daniel Cummins:

What kind of changes have you noticed in kids learning?

Honey Kim:

I think the biggest thing is just how much learning happens in the smaller activities between the bigger things. So just basically in, if I'm in my classroom, I always have kids come in before class or just during breaks, lunches, to ask for help. But now if I'm just online, they feel less able to just approach me easily. And there aren't that many students will just like hang out and talk to us during our Zoom sessions or something like that. And having to call on students just one by one, instead of just being able to like have them go off in groups and then walk around and kind of facilitate conversations, it's a lot more difficult doing that online. So I feel like a lot of students, it's easy for them to tune out and kind of do other things.

For me this year, I'm teaching honors and AP students. So they're more intrinsically motivated to do well. I know that a lot of my colleagues have been complaining that students will just enter Zoom and then leave. And so even after class, the thing will still be logged in, but they haven't been there the entire time. They're just, like, had it on. And other students are just logging into multiple students' accounts and then not doing anything either. So it is definitely frustrating to not know whether a student is there, not know if they're playing video games on the side or texting, or just not engaged in the class.

Daniel Cummins:

I know there's a lot of challenges and frustrations. Maybe a hard question right now, but what are you hopeful for? What things make you excited for the future of either the kids you're teaching, or teaching in general education?

Honey Kim:

I think this is a really good moment where people are using more technology in the classroom, which is kind of a given, but I know a lot of teachers weren't really comfortable with doing that. And a lot of students weren't really used to doing that either. And so now, hopefully, there'll be more development in those ed tech tools. But also just in using them in daily classroom activities. I feel like a lot of them are really helpful because there are things where students are able to submit a poll or something and you can get the data responses right away, versus doing that on paper and having to go through all of those



things. So there are online platforms that are very helpful that I feel like will be useful even in the future when everything is in person again.

And just even getting to know my students again this year, even though we've had to do the community building through virtual video camera and whatnot, it's still been really nice. And I'm fairly optimistic that we will go back in some hybrid fashion at some point this school year. So I'm excited to see all of them, and just to continue having all of these discussions. Especially these days with everything going on, there's a lot to talk about, and students have a lot of opinions, especially high schoolers. So it's really nice to hear from them.

Daniel Cummins:

As you said, I think there's reason to be hopeful that, despite this times' frustrations and challenges, there'll be an impetus for sort of accelerated change for the better, in some areas, including adoption of technology that is beneficial.

Honey Kim:

Yeah, definitely.

Daniel Cummins:

And hopefully, it'll make high schoolers, and probably even little kids, a lot more socially aware because just there's so much going on right now. Is there anything that you'd like to share as a teacher, with your perspective as a teacher, to either healthcare professionals, medical students going into medicine, people in healthcare, just the public in general?

Honey Kim:

I think the main thing, like I said earlier, was just in prioritizing the safety of everybody and not saying because there are just a few people who will potentially be at risk, then it's fine for us to disregard safety norms. And just for things to be more regulated and clear. I think the information spread is a little bit flawed in that a lot of people have different opinions because they hear from different news sources, and they have completely different information of what's happening with COVID. How it even spreads is still a debate amongst a lot of people. So I think once that information is much more clear to everybody, then people feel much more comfortable with it and be able to like have a more nuanced view about it.