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Phil: This is Phil Pogue. We're in Harvard, Illinois. We're in Jefferson Elementary School here in Harvard. And we're going to be talking to Antonio Carbajal, regarding his role as teacher in the Jefferson Elementary School. This is part of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library Oral History Project on the topic, Tumultuous 2020.

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We're happy to have Antonio talk to us today about his own experiences. And to begin with, could you give us some family history about yourself?

Antonio: Sure. I was born in Mexico, and I was in a little town. It was about a thousand people. And I went to the school all the way to sixth grade.

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Then after that, the whole family, we moved to Mexico City, where I went to junior high, high school, all the way to college. I became a dentist, and I grew – I worked as a dentist for about four years in Mexico City. I had my own practice. But one day, I decide to come to visit my cousins around the area.

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And one day one of my cousins showed me his check and I asked him, this is what you – how much money you make a week? He said, "Yeah." And I said, "Oh, this is pretty good." And right away he said, "Why don't you stay? You can make more money here than what you make in Mexico as a dentist."

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And, "No, I don't think I'm going to do it." But three weeks later, my plan was to stay only four weeks. And, after a little while, I start working and I stayed in the United States, in here. And I get a job where I became, in a textile company, where I became, at the end of it,...

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plant manager in there. And after 15 years working for that same company I get – I don't know – sick and tired of that, because you don't get the recognition in there, and one day my ESL teacher in McHenry County College asked me, "Antonio, can you...

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...make me a favor? I need a teacher, somebody who teach the GED class in Spanish." "Maybe let me see, let me think my schedule. Tell me about it." And

she explained me, she gave me the schedule and I said, "Okay I'll do it on Saturday." And, since the first semester in there, teaching the GED class

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to Hispanics, I thought about education. I like this. I like the kind of feedback from the students, their feelings when they graduate, and they come straight to you and say, "Thank you, because you did something for me." And that year, it was when I became a teacher right here in Harvard.

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I started in this district working as a bilingual teacher.

Phil: And in any of your activities when you were in Mexico, did you participate in school activities and athletics?

Antonio: I was not really into sports because my father used to live in Mexico City and we were in the country. And I had to watch like...

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...like a kid, I was at the farm – we have a couple of pigs, cows, a donkey, and I have to watch them, and I didn't have time. I was in school for six hours a day. But the only thing that I did when I was in college was organize like a – how do you call it? Like a workshop with...

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...one of the top facial surgery in Mexico for my classmates – for the whole school. But I organized that event. I talked with this person, and he accepted. He gave us that presentation, two days presentation, to the whole university.

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That's what I did with one of my friends. And it was when I figured out, I was not too shy when I talk. Because my idea was that I was too shy. I didn't like presentations in the class. I didn't raise my hand. I was not that kind of kid. But on that day, when I organized all that stuff, talking with people, I can do this.

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And from there, it was a very nice experience.

Phil: Well, when did you come to Jefferson?

Antonio: To this school, I came eight years ago. But I was already working for the district. I was working at the junior high. So as a bilingual teacher, I have to teach fifth grade, sixth, seventh, and eighth, teach them the language,...

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...the English language. And make sure they transfer. I used to follow my group of kids to every classroom to make sure they acquire some knowledge because in those years we used to have just at least 20 kids from Mexico with zero English.

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And we, our problem in the school was not to put them like a – the swim and sink. No, I was helping them going to their classes, help them to – with their homework, or explain them again the subject and teaching them, teaching them the language too. It was a very good experience.

Phil: So the number of years you've been in the Harvard School District...

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...between junior high and high school?

Antonio: This is my 20th year.

Phil: 20th year. How many students do you work with currently?

Antonio: I have two classes, 38 students. I have like about 30 Hispanics and 8...

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...Anglo kids, because we run the dual language program, so we teach them in Spanish and in English. So like in my case, I am the Spanish teacher. I teach language arts in Spanish, but the Spanish part. I teach science and social studies and Spanish. So, my...

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...co-worker, Mrs. Rosales, she teaches math and language arts and English. So we split the time exactly in half. And at that time, I just switched the classes a few minutes ago. My class go with her and her class comes to me. Every day we switch the class.

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Phil: And what grades would these be?

Antonio: It's fifth grade.

Phil: Fifth grade.

Antonio: Fifth grade.

Phil: How do they qualify to be in dual language?

Antonio: This is a voluntary program, and they start since kindergarten. So the district makes like a survey and interviews the parents. Whoever wants to come to the program,...

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...they are welcome to come. So we have, like in fifth grade, we have six classes in dual language. And the total we have this year is nine classes and three – no six – are in dual language.

Phil: And then –

Antonio: And three in monolingual.

Phil: By the time they finish high school then, they would get a dual language certificate?

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Antonio: Uh-huh. And it is called, biliteracy certification from Tele. It's like a diploma that they give them the like – okay, you are proficient in English and in Spanish and also, the same program gives them college credit. It's about 12 credits in college.

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Just as I – the college uses them as elective credits. So if you take Spanish in college, you don't have to take that class. You don't have to pay. You got all the credits when they finish this program.

Phil: Well, let's now go back to March 2020.

Antonio: March 2020.

Phil: And that's when the pandemic hit, and you would suddenly have the school close.

Antonio: Uh-huh.

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Phil: How much time did you have to prepare to go to remote learning?

Antonio: Oh my god, that was a chaos. So, we got the good news Friday morning that we have to go remote. And we have to prepare, we have that weekend. So mainly that Friday.

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It's like, "Okay guys, now you're going to teach using the internet. The kids are going to stay at home. They will have their Chromebook. You guys have your computer. You're going to work from home. And they are at home too." It was – how are we going to do this? But we work together, the whole – in my case, working with the fifth grade team.

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We put, like all the - everybody's expertise, especially in technology and programs that we could use with the kids. And that day, as in Friday, okay, I think we know how we are going to start on Monday. But after that, it was always talking to – in my case – to my team. Okay, what we are going to do?

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How this program runs, how you do this, how you do that. And it was like a very nice team effort that we put together.

Phil: Had you had any experience using remote learning prior to March 2020?

Antonio: Zero. Nothing. I knew about the classes. I didn't even take a – I didn't even took a...

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...class in college and took remote, nothing. I remember I took a class using VHS tapes when I was in college, in McHenry County College, but that was, that's it. I know how to navigate it with the media, Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, all that stuff, but giving...

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classes? Not really.

Phil: Well, that Friday, when you were told that, then, what happened on that particular day? Did you –

Antonio: It was the orders from the COVID, the pandemic we had, and it was getting really bad...

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...in the county. Everywhere. So this became – the pandemic became a really health problem for the community, for the teachers, for everybody. Nobody was safe. And the district and also the education authorities, the government, they said, “Hey, we have to close.” They said, “We have to shut down almost everything.

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That's how we are going to survive.”

Phil: How many students were you responsible for at that time?

Antonio: 36, 37.

Phil: So when you went remote, did you get all 36 on right away?

Antonio: No. The first day, I have about 10 kids missing.

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In both classes. And I have to start asking the parents, calling them, “Where is your son? Where is your daughter? They have to be in Zoom with me.” So it was about three hours, something around that time.

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Three hours they have to be with me. And these kids didn't show up at all. And the rest of the class, they were present, they were participating or trying to learn. So it was, I don't know, it was complicated. The first, almost, you can say a couple of weeks, you got chaos all over the place.

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But little by little we started getting the hang of it. And the kids start working, following directions. It was funny, because I remember one day I asked one of the kids, “Come on are you gonna do it or you know, you don't?” You know what he did? He just turned off his computer and said goodbye. The kid did not show up for...

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...three days in a row, until I called his parents. And they said, “Oh, he said he didn't have to participate.” No, he has to participate. And I told them what happened and they said, “Okay, well, we will make sure that he's going to be there.” That's what happened those days.

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Phil: Did all the missing students eventually show up? That you talked about or were there some that were lost for the rest of that term?

Antonio: No, no, we got all of them back. So, it was our – our goal was to get everybody on board, try to make sure they - it's the school year,...

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so because we want, we wanted to serve them, we don't want them to lose anything. And so we communicate with the parents one by one. Okay, guess what? Where is your son? So, remember the district, so some of the kids didn't have internet at home. So the district provides a hotspot, so internet at home to those kids.

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So to make sure they have access to the education. And some kids – it took a little while to get the hotspot, the way they can connect through the internet using their Chromebook. But at the end we got everybody, at least in my classes, we got everybody on board.

Phil: Did you have to work with other teachers...

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...with those students? Or were you pretty much on your own?

Antonio: My classes, they are with me in Spanish, they are with again Mrs. Rosales in English, and we make sure we split the time and we make sure they get what they need. And like, connected with the parents sometimes.

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So my homeroom, I have half of the class, so only 19. And she has – the other half class is the other 19. And both connect with the parents but, if you are the homeroom teacher, you have more contact with them. But Mrs. Rosales and I were always – we talk every day.

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And the internet, making sure that every kid was accountable about what they were doing. If they were not there, where are they, try to look for them. And if, now when going to the – getting, again, getting the help we as professionals needed to help students,...

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...we have meetings with our fifth grade team, meetings with the principal, Mrs. Flodder. We were connected; the adults connected to make sure the kids get the right education. And what I remember the most was in our fifth grade team, we put everybody's knowledge...

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...together with technology, with resources, and we share it. We share all those resources. Like in my case, I think I asked most of my, the most help that I needed from my team was technology-wise. Because for my age, technology is like, I use a typewriter, the electronic typewriter, and all of this,...

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...it was almost new for me because, like, my typing is just two fingers. And I survived with that, but it's like, when you need all that, all that information, all that technology, oops, sometimes I'm like, what am I going to do with this? And I always have somebody in my team to go to,...

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...and ask them, okay, how you do this? Or how can I do this? Or how I can get the resources?

Phil: How many were in the team? How many people?

Antonio: We are nine teachers.

Phil: Well, can you describe what a typical lesson was that you used during that time period? Just pick a subject that you were teaching...

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and kind of describe how you had to present it.

Antonio: Like, okay, let's see. Language arts. Spanish. Alright. Like, subjects. Alright. I have a book, so it's called *Bien Dicho*. This book – the kids...

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...have like a copy, but I made the copies and I sent it to them to Google Classroom. So we have a class set up in Google Classroom for these two classes and I used to make copies of every chapter, send it to them. They have their book on the screen and through Zoom I was explaining them,

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“Okay look, the subject of the day is: yo, tu, el, nosotros, ustedes, ellos, those are the subjects. That's how you call people. And when you use it you have to, yo trabajo, connect the subject with the verb, yo trabajo, like present time, yo trabajo, tú trabajas, él trabaja,” so...

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After, I give them examples, and, on my end, I was writing the examples. I had my document camera here, writing the sentences. And the other end, the students have their notebook, writing those examples. And after that, they have the book with the...

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...normally between five to seven sentences that they have to correct. So copy the sentence and put the proper subject in that sentence. Who is doing the action? And you can check every student, what they are doing. It was a challenge, but it was...

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...something different; it was a very good experience.

Phil: Did the students, when they used Zoom, did they have to be seen or were there some that you signed in but you didn't know where they were?

Antonio: No, in the beginning it was, I have to see you. That was the rule, I have to see your face. Or your room, what you are doing in there.

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Until like we get started working together, because some kids, since the beginning, they didn't want to turn on the camera. Also, one day I remember one of the parents, Mr. Carvajal, my son doesn't want to show his face and I prefer not him not to do it.

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Because it's like this is the technology and I don't want everybody seeing my son. And I explained it to her, “Look, if he comes to the school, he will see the same. He will see those 18 kids. And the screen I have all the kids in here. He can see them and they can see your son.

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The privacy is like the same like in a classroom, normal classroom. I don't see why not.” And she agreed, so since that day the kid was there and he became one of my best.

Phil: Did you have any parents you had trouble reaching because they didn't have phones?

Antonio: Yes, I had one,...

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...two parents, only two parents. And they had phone. The problem is they never answer the phone and you cannot leave a message in there because they, I don't know, they don't know the technology or – you have a bunch of messages in there, sooner or later you have to delete them. So they were fooled.

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No way to – and sometimes we used to send social workers home. Where is this kid? Mom doesn't answer, the kid is not showing. Like in my case, I sent two times. I went to ask the social workers, Mrs. Julie and Mr. Hennings, I said to go and...

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...visit parents because they don't answer the phone. And some of them – so everybody have access through the internet, but it was mainly through phones. They didn't have a computer at home, only the Chromebook that the kid had from school. And normally the parents did not have a...

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...they didn't feel confident to use those Chromebooks, that technology, because they don't really know. So, it's part of – the Hispanics are not too – they don't have all the resources. So, it's a little behind, especially in technology, in the use of technology.

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Phil: How did you feel that year ended and what impact did you feel it had on your students if you had been able to stay in person?

Antonio: The benefit? That's what you're asking, right?

Phil: Yes.

Antonio: The benefit - it's mainly the problem of – they miss the social interaction.

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In the school, you don't go and get tons of information, and you have to put it in your brain. At the school you got to socialize, to play with your classmates,

to work in teams, you learn how to interact. They grow up together, because, like the way...

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...these kids came back after what, more than a year. They don't know how to play. They push and shovel each other like brothers and sisters at home. That's how you learn how to define yourself with your brothers and your sisters at home, right? Pushing and shoveling each other and accusing each other with mom. That's the way they came to school.

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They don't know how to interact with other kids and they became really like sensible, like, crying for everything. No, no, no, no, no. We need to be – that was what I saw when they came back, what they have.

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Phil: But during -

Antonio: Plus the academic part, they lost tons of the information. I think the kids acquire about 30% of the knowledge that they normally can have in a

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year in school. That's my estimation, 30%, something like that. They didn't get more than that. And plus, now, when they came back, they are in school, we gave them the standardized test. The name is NWEA. N-W-E-A. It's in math and reading. The kids...

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...are exactly – they lost one year, two years, because they were not here, they were not in school. So it was like, it was awful for them.

Phil: At the end of the 2020 school year, then, in the summer,...

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...was there more training with you and the teachers to – how to use the internet better or use remote learning?

Antonio: Yes, we have more training. We have a, how do you call it, boot camp or something like that? Boot camp. It was two weeks of training.

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And – mandatory, I think it was only one, but there were two where you were trained about programs, how to use them in the classroom, so the resources that we were going to have, a math program – a new program in math, and – what else?

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And planning lessons. So, you send – we call it the AVID program, AVID program, A-V like in Victor, I-D, AVID program. And with that program is like,...

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...it's a program where you are supposed to teach the kids how to learn, how to develop their skills. They use the term 'rigor' in there, so, to teach them higher level thinking. And we were getting training in that stuff too, how to improve, how to be better teachers...

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...in that area. And plus, the kids need it because they are not getting what they were supposed to get.

Phil: Well, let's then go to last school year, the 2021. How did Jefferson Elementary operate last school year? Did it start remotely or in person?

Antonio: No, it was remotely.

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Let me think. Yeah, it was remotely for about six months. Yeah, we came back in...

Phil: And that –

Antonio: March, beginning of March.

Phil: And when you returned in March, was it –

Antonio: Hybrid or in person or...

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long distance? The original plan was to get half of the class. My class was 18 okay, nine and nine divided in two days. But, because we have to adapt the classroom,...

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...so the social distance, the kids were supposed to be six feet apart. And like my classroom has the rectangular tables and they are six feet. And they were perfect, but not too many tables like that fit in a classroom. Like in my case, I have room for 14 students with the proper distance, okay?

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That's why the plan was to get half of the students two days and then the rest of the students the other two days. And we were like that for two weeks, three weeks, and then with STEM happening here. We start having only...

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...getting kids back, but we – some kids stay, since the beginning, some kids stay at home. Some kids stay at home. The parents didn't want to get anything to do with COVID. My kid, I want him at home. I want to make sure he or she is safe. And I had, in my classes, we had, like,...

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...six students who stay at home. So it became hybrid. So I have kids in the classroom and kids at home. And I have to have the Zoom open for those kids at home, plus the ones I have in here, in the classroom.

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But it was something that, I don't know, I think I could accomplish a lot of work with my students in the classroom, but the ones at home, they are missing a lot of stuff. Or just the working in the team, working together, or doing the assignments – some things that they cannot. It was funny how to – okay, what am I going to do?

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Check the screen? Work with these kids. It was like, almost a chicken without a head, running all over the place, trying to accommodate everybody. And it was, I don't know, we survived. And at the end, we got all the kids back. It was, I think, the last couple of months. Everybody came back to school except three students. They stay at home...

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...the rest of the year. The parents say, "No, I don't want my daughter" – yeah, they were girls – "I don't want my daughters get any to do with COVID." Okay.

Phil:

So to understand, 2020, last school year, did you start in person with the hybrid or did you start remotely?

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Antonio: In the beginning of the year, right? No, in the beginning it was remotely.

Phil: And then –

Antonio: Remote. And it was the same. So all the kids at home, again, through Zoom.

Phil: And then in the spring is when you did the hybrid?

Antonio: The hybrid.

Phil: And did –

Antonio: In person, in hybrid, and remote, almost at the same time.

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Phil: But you never, last year, had all the students all at one time in?

Antonio: No. No, because at the end, still those three kids, they stay at home.

Phil: But you had some gradually come into the school from remote.

Antonio: Yeah, yeah.

Phil: How did you feel that you were teaching remotely compared to the prior year –

Antonio: Prior year?

Phil: When you had no experience?

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Antonio: It was really frustrating because it's not the same to see people on the screen and they are waiting for instructions, do this, do that. Plus, it's like, how am I going to – If you want to show something or do experiments, forget it.

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They can see it, but they're not doing, they're not touching anything. Or you put them in a program where they have to work with a program, normally in math or reading. So like, but the kids, I don't know, my thinking is, the kids, if they see it, it's coming from...

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...the internet. It doesn't have any academic value. Because, like, I'm going to give you an example. Like last week, I asked the kids, "Okay kids, this is the

assignment, the reading assignment, that I have for you guys to do at home. I don't have the copies. I'm going to send it through Google Classroom," ...

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...because we have all of the – ready to go if something comes. And everybody, “No, I want copies. I want the paper.” And I can't really get related to that. I want to see it. I want to touch it. I want to mark the paper. Some kids have a highlight and a pencil. I don't know. It's like, keep them more concentrated.

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Whatever comes on the screen, they always – like, you lose them because they are so used to that technology. So sometimes I tell them, “You guys know everything. You watch TV, you have your phone, you have your Chromebook, you have your video games.

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So you do everything at the same time. And guess what? You're not doing anything.” According to me. I need to do one thing at a time. If I want to really be concentrated, I need to do one thing. Not just see images, listen sound. No, no, no, no. A light. Then it's like, “No, maestro, it doesn't work that way.

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We listen to everything you say.” And what did I say? Huh? It's something that I don't see with the students. They don't concentrate really because all of the technology they have around.

Phil: Last year's class, were those all students that you were familiar with or were they brand new students?

Antonio: In the beginning, they were brand new students,...

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all of them, because they were in fourth grade. They just went to my – I didn't even know; they didn't say so.

Phil: How challenging was that? Because you didn't know them and you're having to deal with it remotely.

Antonio: You start building a relation with them. We, like everybody, every year, you talk to them, you introduce yourself. They talk to you, they introduce themselves.

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And we do exercises, things, activities too. How I can know you. And little by little, so, it took a little while. Again, some of them disappear. Some of them turn off the computer. No, no, no, you're not going to do this. And we were getting more experience, right? So right away, grab the phone, talk to his parents,...

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..."Hey, where is your son?" "Right here, he's in class." "No, he's not. He turned off the computer." "No, but he – the computer is on." "Not in my class." "Can you connect him again?" And I just, "Hey, what happened?" "Oh, I lost connection." They always give you that excuse: "I lost connection." And it happens a lot of times. Some of the kids, they used to lose connection most of the time.

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A few times every day. And some of them, they were – the internet connection was good all of the time. But it was – the connection was another thing.

Phil: Were there some projects that you normally would be doing last year that you could not do because you were remote?

Antonio: My philosophy as a teacher is hands-on.

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Do it. If you don't do it, probably you're not going to learn. So, like in social studies, we have big projects, like now, we are working on first immigrants to how the Indians came to America, okay? We just do a huge map with...

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...color, water paint, so they use the paint brushes, paint the map, they do the labeling, the information, so it takes a couple of days to do it. We don't spend all the time in the project, but it takes a long time to do it, like projects like the space.

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We create like a model, it's huge, like two meters long, six feet long, and we create the solar system. They do the planets, they color it, and then they draw the orbits, the sun in the center. It is something that they really like it.

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And they really keep themselves busy and they think about what they are doing and they learn. And I try to do one project with them at home. Something that I do every year is, during the history, to build a ship like the Spaniards in English...

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...used in those years to transport the slaves, right? And normally, when we are in school, everybody turns it in. And that project is done at home. They have to do it at home with their parents or friends or whoever can get help. I get two projects done. Only two from thirty-six...

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...and when they are here, everybody gets it done. How is that possible? If this project, this has to be done at home every time, every year. Not these two years that we were out. They didn't do it. And I talked to some parents. "Well, he didn't say anything."

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Always passing the ball, one to each other. "He didn't say anything. That's why we didn't help him." Okay.

Phil: Well now we've reached the current school year, the 21 -

Antonio: 1920. 19 and 20.

Phil: 22 school year.

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How did this school year start? Were you all in person?

Antonio: Let me see. Yeah, everybody's here, in school. All the students are in - I think there was, like, an option, but my kids, they're here, everybody's here.

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Phil: So you have no one on remote like you had before?

Antonio: No. I can have remote too, but only when they are in a medical excuse. Medical excuse is when they were exposed to somebody with COVID or a home or in the bus. So if they are exposed to, like, another student...

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...in the bus, they are sent home for quarantine, 14 days. But if the parents take them to get tested, they can come back. If they are negative, they come back. And if they are...

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...medically excused, they have to stay at home, and then we provide the hybrid teaching, the remote teaching to them through the internet. Using our Google Classroom, we send them the assignments. Again, whatever things they can do, things they cannot do, at home.

Phil: And as far as your attendance, how has that been then...

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...with some, perhaps out with quarantining?

Antonio: The first time between the two classes we had four kids in quarantine, four. And then two of those came back, like, three days later.

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And one of those kids stayed at home for almost a whole month because somebody was positive at home, too. It became like a bigger problem. And when everybody came back, we had only two cases more,...

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...that they have to stay at home. Other than that, the classroom's normal. Like I don't have anybody out since two weeks ago.

Phil: Did you have any other unusual procedures that were different from when you had to suddenly go remote back in March of 2020 that now are new rules for the students, such as the bathrooms or cafeteria or...

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...social distancing or hallways?

Antonio: So I just follow all those state district and state recommendations. The kids, like in the classroom, they have to be seated three feet apart and they have a breakfast in the classroom. And...

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...in the cafeteria, I think they eat there only three or four classes, because it's not big enough. Some kids eat in the classroom too, but the teacher is not there because it's the same schedule for the teacher and the students. So

somebody else is watching them. But some kids eat in the classroom. Some in the cafeteria. Breakfast,...

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...everybody's in the classroom. Social distance is, when they move around, they are supposed to get lined up. I use the rule. It's three feet apart, one yard apart, or one meter apart. Whatever you want, but it has to be this long.

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So it's helping me to – okay, meters, yards, feet. And, always, we make sure they go – if they go this direction, they go on the right side. If they go in opposite direction, they come on the left side. That way we avoid agglomerations, people piling up. We try to get them as far apart as we could because...

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...the kids, once in a while, they totally forgot about. They just want to be together, hugging each other, doing their high fives.

Phil: And everyone has to wear masks?

Antonio: Everybody has to wear masks all the time. All the teachers are vaccinated. And we have to wear masks, too, in the classroom.

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Phil: How difficult is that for understanding?

Antonio: The kids? Especially the ones that are very shy. They talk low, soft. Sometimes I, “move your mask a little bit and then maybe, I can hear you.” But it's only a few seconds, they put it back.

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Phil: Are your lessons more like it was in 2019, 2020 before the pandemic, or are you combining things that you picked up from doing remote?

Antonio: They are more combined. Like in my case, I use more the technology and the programs we have in the school,...

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...because it's like - Reading. The reading in Spanish, I use a website, we have a program, we have it here, the district pays it. It's called RASKIDS and they can read in Spanish and English, and the content of that website is mainly academic. It's not like fictional stuff,...

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...no. Mainly, it's academic vocabulary and science, social studies, technology. And I use that program a lot for them to read. They can read at home, they read in school when we have reading time, when they are with me, they read it here.

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And I can see, like, now they read like almost double the time they used to do it before. So that part increased a lot. It's much, much better to see the kids engage in reading, but it's that specific material.

Phil: How has teaching been this year for you now that you have students back -

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...more in person?

Antonio: More fun. It's more active, more engaging, more – the kids are – they are learning. And I think the kids' attitude is more positive. They want to learn. Because it's like – for this age, it's like they think the adults are forcing them to go to the school. They don't need to go.

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They know they are the center of the universe at home. They are going to get whatever they want. But all this time, I think they learned something. It's like, being at home all the time is not that healthy. It's not good. And they are putting more effort in their education. I can see it.

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And those – how long? Three years, three months. These three months I have seen very nice progress with my students because they are more dedicated to be in group again, in class, with their friends, socialize, and doing things with their hands,...

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...because we already started projects like at the end of the year. So the last two weeks, I teach them how to make piñatas. And they love it. So then we do the whole process. But I think this year has been pretty good.

Phil: Well we just have two or three more questions. What are some of the future challenges that exist...

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...for these students in bilingual over the next few years as we recover from the pandemic? You've talked about some of the lost learning and the socialization. Are there other challenges that those students will have as they move through the system, up through the junior high and then into the high school?

Antonio: They are going to be, with my belief,...

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...especially the kids from last year, they are going to be almost lost in junior high. So, it's going to take for the longer time to get used to that because junior high is higher level, is more independence, more - It's how you advocate for yourself, because you are going to have in there, normally...

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...between about eight teachers. It's not the same dealing with two than eight, and every teacher has their own program to teach. And these kids are - they are going to be lost in the beginning. So sooner or later, they will catch up because I am a - I work for McHenry County College as a GED teacher and I can see it with adults,...

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...they can - some of them went to third grade level education. They catch up all the way in a couple of years. But they need to, because they already know what the education is for. So life is going to catch for you, what you want. Okay, I want to be a doctor. Okay, you have to work, study, take the time, and you can be a doctor.

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But that kind of mentality is until you figure out what you want. And for these kids, it's going to take a little while to figure it out. But it's not going to be a long time. So it's not they are not losing that much. Sooner or later, just as soon as they reach adulthood, they will figure out that, whatever you want, just go for it.

Phil: Did you yourself have to deal with COVID?

Antonio: Not at all. Just the vaccines. I got the vaccines and,...

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...but I didn't. I didn't even see it close to my family. No.

Phil: Well, we've covered a lot of topics, starting with the events of March of 2020. Do you have any unusual stories tied to having to go remote, doing hybrid, and then finally getting back into more of what we might think of as the old normal?

[1:02:04]

Antonio: When we were assigned the remote part, it was really stressful because it's like, okay, what am I going to get today? How's this kid reacted? Or what am I going to see on the screen?

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Because the kids were at home. And sometimes you can see the whole environment at home. What's going on in there? Or you could see the kid just laying down on the couch and looking straight in there. Okay, that means the TV is in the back. So trying to abuse the system, something like that.

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Not to do their work. And something funny that happens is like, what's going on around? The behavior that is not supposed to be there? Adults misbehaving. And kids fighting like dogs and cats, not realizing that they have a screen, a computer in there, a camera, and sound, and everybody's watching.

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They didn't figure it out. I remember one time one of the students was – really have a big fight with her grandma and they were using really foul language in there. The grandma and the kid, back and forth, oh my god. The kids have to live with this? And one thing...

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...this was funny for me, one of the parents accused me with the principal, that I insult her. When? I never saw her. The situation was, her daughter was in class with a little kid, like, six months old and the kid was crying and crying, and I just told the kid, "Don't you..."

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...think you are not the one who has to be in charge of the kid?" And she said, "My mom is here with me." Okay. "Well, okay. What about if you give it to your mom and think about it – your education because you see, being a babysitter, it seems like it's hard, right?"

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"Yeah." "Well, just concentrate on your education and go to college and you will see life is not that hard." Well, the mom took it personal that I was talking to her and I didn't know that she was there. And then she accused me with the principal and then I talked to her. I didn't even see her. I was telling the kid, "go to college,..."

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...do your work, study and then go to college, that way you don't do babysitting." And it's like, oh my God. And the kid, like a week later, she came and, "are you going to apologize to my mom?" "About what?" "What you said in the Zoom to her?" "I didn't talk to her. I'm not going to apologize."

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It was like that, something like that. But it's like, for me, I like to deal with the kids, to have them in there. I treat them like, I don't know, like family. I like to be really straight to them, familiar with them. I like to...

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...interact with them all the time. Clown around, like one of my kids said, "Mr. Carvajal, you sing really awful." "That's why I'm a teacher. If I have a good voice, maybe you will listen to me on the radio or the internet. But that's why I work as a teacher. I can clown around a lot." Something like that.

[1:06:54]

Phil: Well, we've covered a lot of questions, Antonio. Is there anything else that you would like to add about having the challenges in teaching during the last couple of years?

Antonio: It was really challenging. It's still there. We still don't see the end of it.

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But I think we survived already. We will keep going. No, I'm not going – this is my last year. I'm going to retire. But COVID doesn't have anything to do with my plan. It was planned since five years ago when I have to get my license renewal. I told the district four years ago, "Guys, 21, 22 is my last year." And everybody said, "Got it."

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Some people think that I'm running away. No, I'm not. It was planned, my plan was to retire this school year. That's it.

Phil: Well I want to thank you very much for your dedication, working with bilingual students here at Jefferson Elementary in Harvard, and all of the challenges of working in a different kind of setting from what people had been trained to do, and thank you for spending the time with us...

[1:08:29]

...on the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library Project, Tumultuous 2020.

Antonio: Thanks to you for the interview, and I hope my experience helps somebody sometime.