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In this series, Special Ed Connection® profiles education service providers across the country who are using innovative and collaborative approaches to serve students with disabilities during extended school closures due to the coronavirus outbreak.

Former Teacher of the Year alters reliable classroom strategies for distance learning



Danielle Kovach

Director name and title: Danielle Kovach, special education teacher for second- and third-graders.

School and school district: Tulsa Trail School in the Hopatcong Borough Schools in New Jersey.

Activity: Incorporated fun activities and behavioral supports while balancing academic lessons during remote learning sessions for her students with communication and behavior challenges.

Story: Like many special education teachers across the country, Danielle Kovach is having the hardest year of her career because the coronavirus outbreak forced her school to close to in-person classes.

Although her school -- Tulsa Trail School in the Hopatcong Borough school system in New Jersey -- quickly pivoted to virtual instruction and she is an experienced teacher who was named the 2011 New Jersey State Teacher of the Year, she has had to figure out how to redevelop reliable classroom strategies for her second- and third-graders to the remote learning setting.

She's also carrying the emotional burden of losing the in-person contact with her students who benefit from the consistent face-to-face interactions with teachers, service providers, peers, and others in school. "Not being with them by far is the hardest thing," she said.

For these reasons, Kovach made an effort to add fun activities that she and her students can enjoy during virtual learning in between academic lessons. One Friday, she let students bring their pets or stuffed animals to the virtual morning meeting. She's also organized virtual Bingo games and a scavenger hunt.

"We can have fun with this too," Kovach said. "It's not just about working."

In between the games, Kovach is making sure students continue to progress academically and within other areas of need. She meets virtually with the whole class daily and has individual lessons with the students throughout the week. Students also meet with related service providers throughout the week. Kovach has reviewed each student's modifications with their parents so they can better support their children at home.

Kovach also continues to highlight positive behaviors for all students by teaching students about making good choices. In line with this, she has created on-the-spot modifications to respond to individual

situations. For example, when a student was refusing to do a math worksheet. Kovach told the student to pick a "magic number" between 5 and 10. The number he picked was the number of problems he had to do on the sheet, and he had a choice of what problems to complete.

Kovach said she is still stretching her students to improve and meet or exceed expectations, but she is being more thoughtful about how to customize assignments while still emphasizing core academic skills -- and providing moments of joy for her students.

"We need to focus on children's social and emotional needs first," Kovach said.

See also:

- [Parent centers, school systems collaborate in response to the coronavirus](#)
- [Don't lose sight of IDEA child find during school closures](#)
- [Coaching Tips for Families of Children with ASD During a Pandemic](#)

For more stories and guidance on this topic, access the [COVID-19 Roundup](#).

[Kara Arundel](#) covers special education for LRP Publications.

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