

Meet Mignon Pierce - A Teacher "Crushing the Pandemic 1st-Grade Style"

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Mignon Pierce, a 1st-grade teacher at Emerson Elementary-Middle School, has spent the last 21 years teaching young learners in the District. When the pandemic hit, Pierce hit the ground running — adapting the way she teaches class, keeping students engaged, and supporting families. During his recent [Rise Up keynote address](#), Dr. Vitti shared the way one parent put it: "She's crushing the pandemic 1st-grade style." He went on to say, "Not only is she warm, not only is she compassionate, but she continues to bring excellence into how she's teaching [throughout the pandemic]."

We spoke with Pierce about how she's adapted to teaching online and curated tips for other teachers of young learners. Here's what she had to say:

On Supporting Families

Be Patient and Have your Parents' Backs

First and foremost is supporting my families, my students, and trying to meet the students where they are. When the pandemic hit, it made me look in the mirror and ask what am I doing to support them? It started with, "I got you. I'm here anytime." Just being patient and meeting the students where they are. Then, it was helping them with devices. I started going to their home to drop off rewards for a job well done. Just showing appreciation for one another. My parents support me a lot.

I've had frustrated parents call me and literally are spazzing. I say, "I've got you, I'm here for you 100%." It's just keeping a stable, calm type of atmosphere. My parents text me from the time they get up, throughout the day, and after school. We have an open line of communication. When I say, "I'll show you. Call me when you get off of work," they appreciate the time that you give and they're more understanding with you and supporting. I have 100% support from all my parents.

Offer Parents Options and Solutions

I do a lot of communicating with parents personally. Not only on the computer. We'll talk on my cell. One of my parents doesn't know if she's going to have a place to live tomorrow. I told her, "Don't worry about the internet. You're going to have workbooks to work in, or I can talk to you on the phone. We will find a way." So, give them other options other than havin them think, 'it has to be this way or no way.' I offer options to my parents and students to meet them where they are, because we just don't know what they're going through.

If we were in the classroom, I'd ask, "Where's your homework? You didn't bring your bookbag." Everything is by the book. But this is different.

Accommodate Your Students' Morning Schedules

My students — because we're an early rise school — they're still sleepy and so I give them more encouragement. "C'mon, can't have you laying down and get sleepy! Wipe the sleepy dust from your eyes!" Sometimes, it's even reminding them, "Don't forget to go wash your face! I give them ample time in the morning to adjust to the schedule." My parents love the fact that I give them time.

Pre-Record Directions for Assignments

I try to record, on Schoology, directions for independent work. I explain it thoroughly. For example, "Go to Clever, click on your Studies Weekly, look at "Week Two," and so on. My directions are so explicit that they should not have a question about what to do, where to go, and how to do it.

I'm trying to get my students to get used to going to Schoology to click the recording. They are able to hear without the support of their parent. Because they're not readers per se or can't understand big words, they will be able to hear the

directions on the recording. Schoology — it's for the parents — but I'm introducing it to my first-graders slowly but surely.

Give Ample Time to Complete Work

I also give them time to complete their work. A lot of times, my parents work at night and so they are asleep [in the morning]. Some of my students are still getting used to navigating in the morning. So I'll give them an option to finish their independent work later. I check their work on the weekends so I don't rush my families. It's never, "It must be done at this time."

On Virtual Classroom Management

Set Virtual Rules

I set some virtual rules as to when to have the microphone on or off. It's almost a routine. They know that if I'm showing a video, they know to turn their microphone off.

I also have something I call, "Everyone, just shout out!" When I'm asking a question, I tell students to "shout out." For example, if I'm blending a word "B- E- D- What's the word? Shout out!" And so, when I say shout out, that's when all the microphones turn on. I love to hear all my students versus the same students participating. When we're done, I say "Ok, ok, now everyone turn your microphones back off so everyone can hear me!" They love when I say shout out, "Shout out, anybody!"

Use a Gentle Tone

Your tone needs to sound gentle. It can get frustrating, yes, but let that frustration be your friend in your head. If you show grace and understanding, I think you'll get a better result from your students.

If you're asking them to turn their video on, sweeten it a little bit. I'll say, "Turn your video on! I'd love to see your beautiful face and I want to mark you here!"

And so, they'll turn it on, and it might quickly go off and I'll say, "I saw you! I love seeing that beautiful face!"

Praise Often and Give Grace

Praise often and give lots of compliments — more than what you're used to in the classroom setting. I had a student today who said, "I had my hand up but you didn't call on me!" I said, "Well I didn't see your hand raised, but I'll call on you soon!" She just lit up and there was sunshine on her face.

No matter what's going on personally, I come with a smile. Even if I see something that behavior-wise is not appropriate, I still keep the same tone. I tell them the negative, but I also give them the positive behind it. "I saw that you're not following directions, but I know you can follow directions because I've seen you do it before." Or, "What's the matter? How come you're not smiling today? I love to see your smile." So, I always have that negative topped with the positive.

I never leave a negative in their thoughts because I find that with all this going on and with all this piled onto a little baby that age, it's enough. They need to fill up and they need to know that I'm loving them back.

Build Community

We do little hearts with our hands. My students don't always want to get off at the end of the day — they want to talk. Sometimes we just say "Hey, let's take a break." I'll still be here, and I'll tell them "Get away from the screen. Give your eyes a break." The kids will say, "But I want to show you something." So, we talk about experiences, it's almost like a show and tell. They just love to have conversation. It just becomes a love for one another. My students are talking in my class before I even get there. They're talking to each other like they were on the phone.

Play Music, Celebrate, and Have Fun!

I play music before each class. In the morning, it's the breakfast café music, so it's more of a jazz style. When we come back, it's upbeat. One of our favorites is "[Can't Stop the Feeling](#)." I try to give them a little breathing room. Everything is not cut and dry. We have fun.

We are getting ready to do a virtual Christmas program, so they're excited about that.

I take pictures of them all the time. When we finish a project or made a magnificent thing, I take pictures of them holding their work up to the camera.

We just had a birthday celebration on Friday. We all made signs and drew a nice picture. I had her hop off the call so it was a surprise. And when she joined she was

like "Aah!" I took a picture and sent it to her mom, so she was grateful for that. I'm just trying to make the best out of it and have fun with it.

Keep Eye Contact

Teachers have to sound natural. If I'm sitting here with a book, I don't have eye contact. That's important during virtual teaching. I try to keep eye contact when teaching online.

Never Stop Teaching Tech

To this day, I'm still step-by-step demonstrating the use of these applications. I walk them through everything. If it's on Clever, we still go through all the steps. Taking it one step at a time. I know the district wanted us to get started with all those learning tools. But, you know, it's going to take some time for the primary students.

Instructional Tips

Use Small Groups for Personal Interactions with Students

I'm finding that the majority of my students in math have the same needs and so I just teach that as a whole group. In reading, I have three groups that I name – Butterflies, Bees, and Ants. They really have fun with me calling them into their breakout room or channel.

After I instruct for some minutes, I show them how to get to their assignment, explain the assignment, and do an example. Then, I say "My little butterflies. I'm getting ready to open up a new meeting and call you to this meeting. And they come flying in!

I utilize EL, but I have to get that information orally. I prefer to do that in kind of privately in small groups because students don't like to show what they know if they don't know in front of other children. So I try to make sure that they have that respect and privacy and make it a teacher-student moment.

I just learned how to do a Teams breakout session yesterday in my study group. I can't wait to start using them.

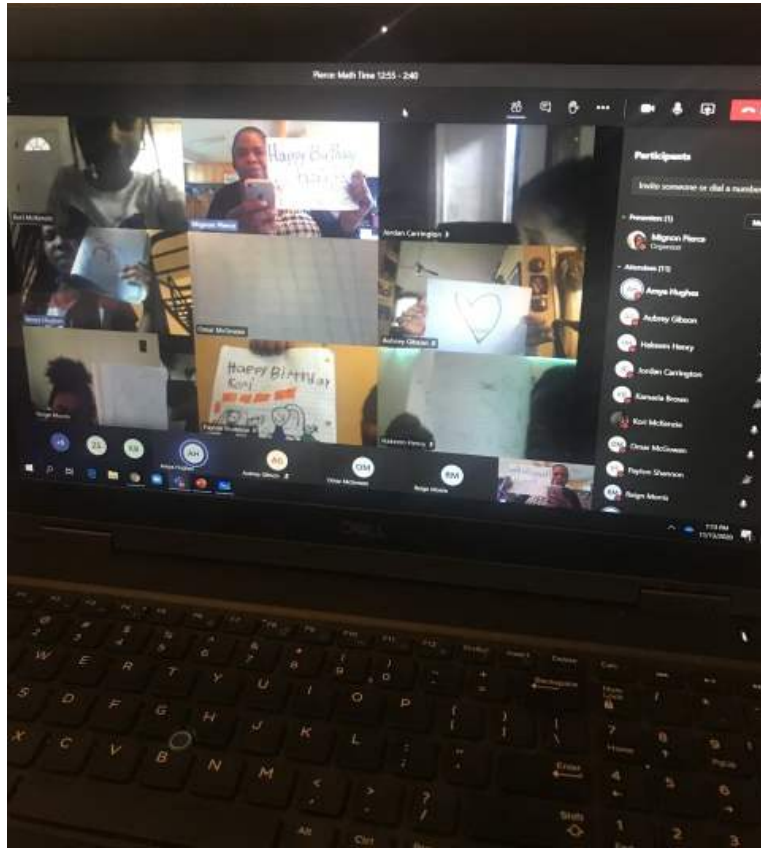
Plan Ahead and Print Out Your Plans

Each weekend, I print out everything that I'm going to use so that I have it on hand. I have my manuals. But some things I have to re-organize because of teaching virtually. Some of the protocols we're not able to do. So I have a table with my plan that sits right next to me. If I need to modify or accommodate, I have something on hand instead of going back on the computer and looking up a lesson. So, it's best for me to plan out and have my day's work in front of me. Just like if I were in the teacher's manuals, I go in and print out my plan for the day and have my curriculum planning guides that help me to instruct.



Ms. Pierce facilitating live instruction on Teams.

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Ms. Pierce's first-grade class holding up signs to celebrate a student's birthday.

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Problem Solving to Get Better Every Day

EXCELLENCE

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We work hard at getting better, which requires us to be honest about what is not working. We learn from our mistakes to get better the next day, and the day after that. Even when we are tired. Even when we want to give up.

We model excellence like **Mignon Pierce** who one parent described as "crushing the pandemic first grade style" with her incredible preparation and patience.

“ During these uncertain times Ms. P. has been a key component to our class moving forward successfully. Everyday we're troubleshooting, sharing information, parents are being well informed - all orchestrated by Ms. P.”

— A parent in Ms. Pierce's 1st grade class at Emerson

Ms. Pierce was featured at RiseUp as an exemplar of a teacher who delivers on the Core Value of Excellence.

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