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# Public Educators Shaking up Classrooms

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**Introduction**

Laura Tenebruso has been teaching 8th grade English for twenty years. She's long been known for fostering an environment of creativity, inclusivity and experimentation in her classroom. Comfy fabric chairs, colorful handmade posters, stuffed animals, and years of carefully curated decorations were long a big part of what made her classroom so special and a big part of her identity as a "cool" teacher. When Tenebruso was finally let back into her classroom after the initial COVID lockdown of spring 2020, she described tears and feelings of heartbreak as she had to throw away every poster, toy, and bit of fabric to make the classroom COVID-safe.

When the physical safety of students became an immediate and heavy priority because of the ongoing pandemic, Tenebruso decided to use all the resources she still had to ensure her students' emotional health as well. She implemented virtual journaling exercise and digital check ins while spearheading the school's SEL committee to prioritize the wellbeing of students, teachers, and school staff.

"That's something super small that she can immediately get a check on how they're doing and we know that kids just appreciate the fact that you asked them. 'Are you okay?' is a huge SEL thing that you can do," said Tenebruso last year in a video interview.

Tenebruso is among the kinds of teachers who make up my community.

My community is public school teachers shaking up classrooms. I pooled information primarily from public educators in Western New York, specifically the  four micropolitan and rural counties (Genesee, Livingston, Orleans, and Wyoming Counties aka the GLOW Region) that connect Buffalo and Rochester, especially Batavia City School District in Batavia, NY. I've been working with teachers mainly in middle and high school. Most teachers are English or science teachers. All of the teachers I work with are early and mid career teachers. They also all are using technology, curriculum, trainings, and education theory to do creative, innovative things in the classroom. That especially means differentiating classrooms - teaching to individuals and individual learning styles over traditional and outdated classroom practices.
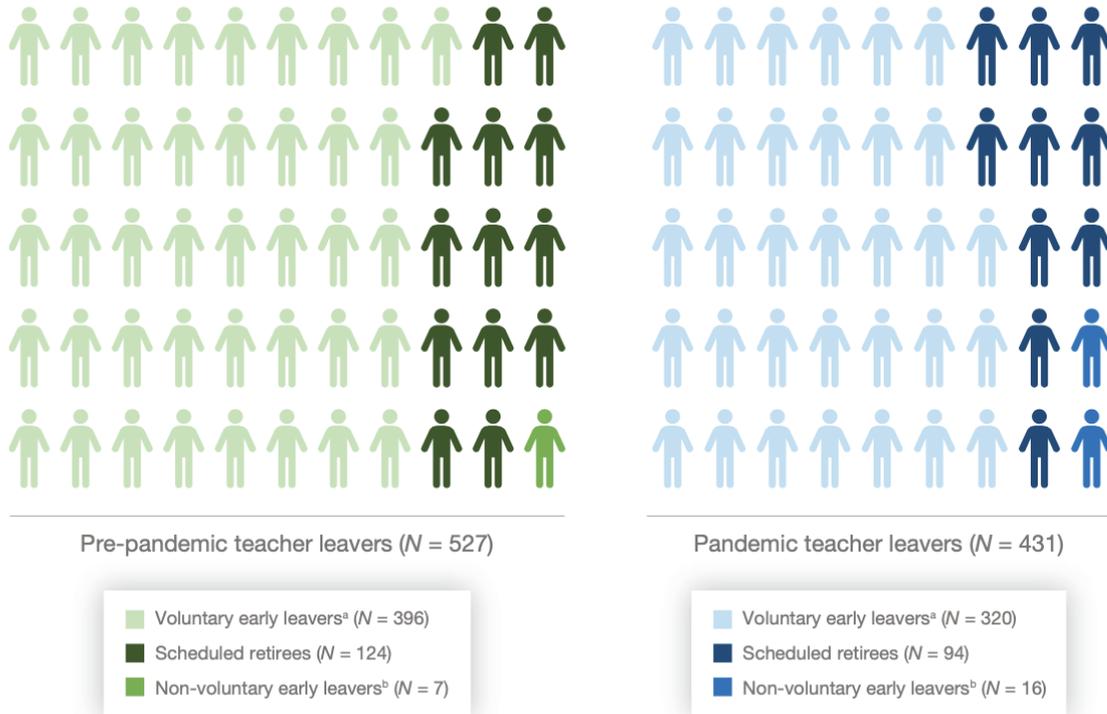
**Background**

There was a lot of momentum at the end of 2020/start of 2021 to shift away from existing curriculum models and spend more time focused on students' mental health, emotional intelligence, and some excitement to figure out how the technological advancements from COVID might help differentiate and improve classrooms long term.

Some things that popped up universally among these teachers throughout the 2020/21 school year were:

- feeling lack of support from administration:
- concern about students' wellbeing and mental health
- Concern about self and other teachers' wellbeing and mental health
- lack of resources
- Desire to destandardize curriculum

- Frustration at news coverage of education especially during the pandemic

Teachers Left the Profession in Similar Ways Leading Up to and During the Pandemic



Pre-pandemic teacher leavers (*N* = 527)

- Voluntary early leavers[a] (*N* = 396)
- Scheduled retirees (*N* = 124)
- Non-voluntary early leavers[b] (*N* = 7)

Pandemic teacher leavers (*N* = 431)

- Voluntary early leavers[a] (*N* = 320)
- Scheduled retirees (*N* = 94)
- Non-voluntary early leavers[b] (*N* = 16)

A rand.org study found that more than half the teachers who've left education since March 2020 were thinking of leaving anyway, highlighting that the pandemic exacerbated far more problems in education than it created. Talking with the community really drove this home for me. A lot of disappointment in education reporting stems from feeling that it's deliberately negative to generate headlines but doesn't address the reality that these problems have existed and have been building for a long time. There's a big opportunity for journalism to support education by connecting community, highlighting solutions, and accurately explaining what is happening in education.

For public educators, there is a lot of potential to teach in new ways, to incorporate new cultural norms, technologies, and ideologies into the classroom in a way that benefits public education and turns out kids who are more empathetic, more prepared, and more self-aware.

**The Project**

The project began over a year ago with a community callout.

It was impossible to be in school because schools in the area were being conducted remotely and/or had stringent guidelines about who could be in the building. Social media, specifically Facebook where I was already connected to a network of teachers from Western New York, became a key way to connect. Through shares and word-of-mouth 17 teachers from 4 states sat down and talked anonymously about their experiences during and right before the pandemic.

From those conversations came a handful of consistent relationships maintained over the three semesters of the program that informed every aspect of the project. It was from these conversations I learned that solutions journalism might be a great way to support the public education community during this uniquely challenging time.

I also learned from the community that any product, service, or project I built would have to go directly to teachers' mailboxes. Feeling overstretched was one of the issues that came up most in dialogue with teachers, and since most of the teachers I was working with were engaged in hybrid learning models, many were lesson planning twice or even three times as much as they were before COVID.
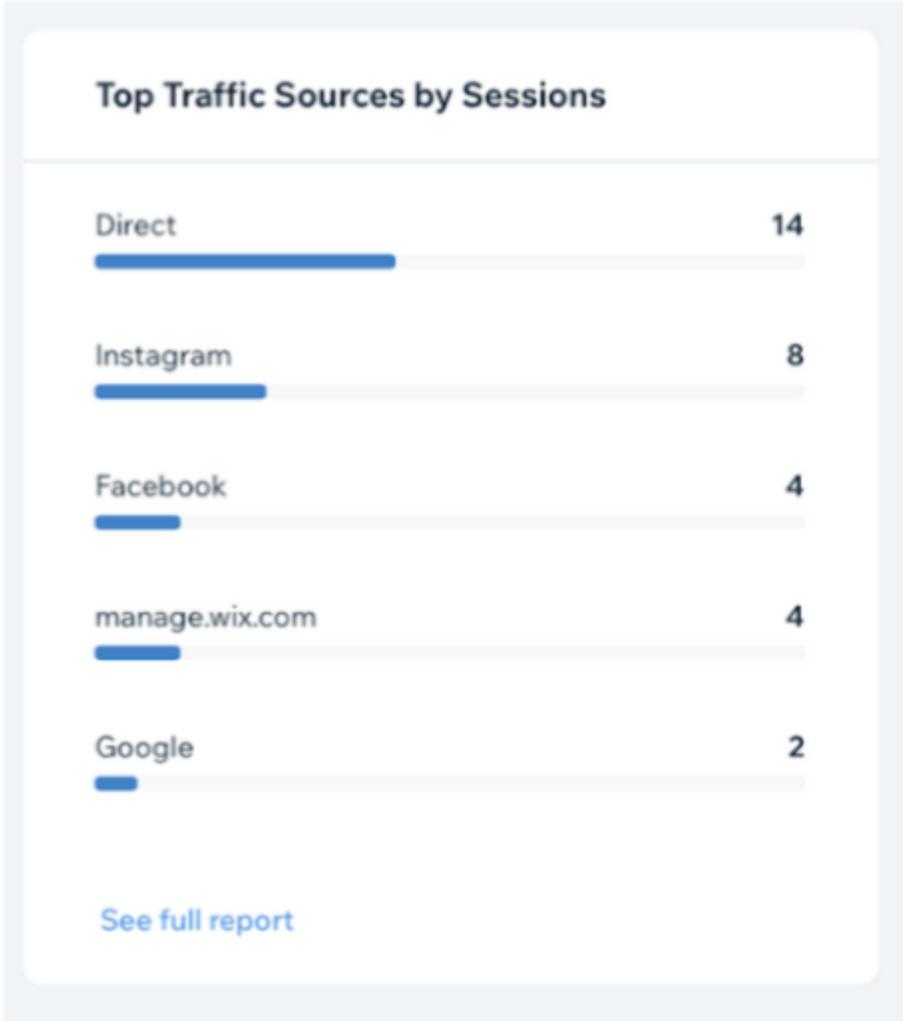
A solutions based newsletter called ChalkTalk was the result of that engagement and research. I began with Substack, thinking that it was the most straightforward and allowed readers to subscribe and get the newsletter delivered directly. Substack was a great platform for delivering a solutions-centered education [newsletter](#). But it didn't fully meet the needs of my community.

Lack of solutions stories was not the only issue for the educators I worked with. The landing page for the newsletter, [chalktalknewsletter.com](#), became a more expanded version of the project and much more successful than the substack page alone. The website allowed for dialogue online and an archive of posts.

Most importantly, it gave me space to include a [Google Form](#) for feedback. The feedback generated from that form and through direct conversations with the community are a key part of ensuring the content stays relevant and helpful for public educators.

The next step in the project would be to partner with educators and curriculum developers to include vetted, hands-on resources for lesson planning. Long term, this newsletter could grow into a living resource for teachers to share and contribute creative and innovative resources to improve classroom learning.

**Metrics, Outcomes and Impact**

## Top Traffic Sources by Sessions

| Direct | 14 |
| Instagram | 8 |
| Facebook | 4 |
| manage.wix.com | 4 |
| Google | 2 |

See full report

My biggest takeaway from the metrics is that the community confirmed that direct traffic was the most likely and the most useful. My only hesitation with a newsletter was that there are so many education newsletters already, but centering solutions stories and reaching out directly to the community was best way to reach them. Fully utilizing the Google Form and consistently implementing feedback could help improve direct traffic, which is by far the best metric.

| Site Sessions | Unique Visitors | Avg. Session Duration |
| --- | --- | --- |
| 33 | 18 | 5m 40s |
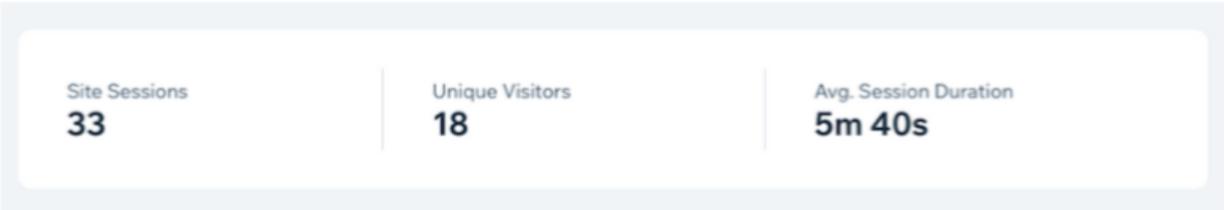
The length of time people spend on the site on average indicates that they are looking around and reading the articles there. For now there are only two articles posted on the site, so as content grows, session duration should grow accordingly.

We're also seeing that there are more site sessions than there are unique visitors, which means that people are coming back. Again, as the content grows and the website expands, we can get a better picture of how audiences are using the site and how often they come back.



**Measuring Impact**

**TEACHER CHATS**

17 teachers from 4 different states

**FORMAL INTERVIEWS**

6 teachers

**AMPLIFICATION OF STORIES**

In my final presentation, I touched on how measuring impact goes beyond metrics. The number of teachers who have been willing to speak with me this year has been significant and I do think it's an important marker of progress.

But I also think the content and quality of our conversations, while not directly quantifiable, is equally important. I've gotten the impression this year that teachers are talked about a lot, especially in conversations about in education, but they aren't so often tapped into as the deep wells of information and insight that they are. Giving people space to tell their stories and candidly share how they are doing in a moment as challenging and complicated and new as this moment is a kind of impact I don't know that I can measure, but that I believe is just as valuable as all other metrics.

**Bigger Picture**

I learned the most from listening to teachers and letting them talk. I was hesitant to set up interviews I knew would be anonymous, off the record, and completely unusable from a journalistic standpoint. But more than building trust in ways I couldn't imagine, I gained incredible insights from this engagement project. I learned that giving people space to share their concerns, hopes, and ideas - as long as we are actively engaged and listening - is just as important or even more so than research and formal reporting interviews.

There were definite limitations due to the pandemic across the duration of this project. I don't want to minimize the challenges or pretend that the ways I engaged with my community could be as effective as being in person and in the classroom. But I do think that having to do this work remotely gave me small insight into what teachers were experiencing themselves and I think that being forced to connect remotely gave us a shared experience and common ground to build from.

I'm glad that I chose this community and I believe that public educators are underserved. I did find myself resistant at times to do direct engagement with teachers because I was afraid of overburdening them or adding to their workload. I wonder a lot about how we might reach people who are so busy and so stressed. I don't know if the answer would have been two more semesters engaging at the pace I was or ramping up sooner than I did, but it would be interesting to expand this project and see what could be done with more hands-on engagement.
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**Other - Notes on Education Reporting**

In recent months, I have seen a shift in the way education reporters are writing, specifically in places like The Hechinger Report and [The Learning Network](), the NYTimes' education newsletter. They are by no means completely solutions oriented and they center students and parents much more than they center educators themselves. But they do have more and more solutions stories and they are providing resources and are using tools of engagement including polls, writing prompts, and calls for engagement.

This supports my research and conclusion that this is one of the ways we can shift journalism in a way that supports education. It's been interesting to see the tone of education reporting begin to shift - not consistently and not strongly enough. But it it's already starting in these niche education reporting markets and newsletters, that means there's room for it to expand into other sections of legacy and mainstream reporting.


**Appendix**

https://www.chalktalknewsletter.com/post/flipping-our-classrooms-beyond-the-pandemic

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1OZIpK-iIq1arFQLHkeT3sEPRfpNBn1O8iEfLK8o4lPI/edit?usp=sharing


http://solutionsnyc.nycitynewsservice.com/2021/05/18/sel-curriculum-could-pave-way-for-post-covid-learning/

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1RjhmC3Wr9KjqMfmOe6bv6XZren-ay9sOfGoZK4tY7HI/edit?usp=sharing

https://thecurrentga.org/2021/07/27/nonprofit-partners-with-georgias-schools-to-test-lead-in-water-supplies/?fbclid=IwAR0q-bkMqtLB4nP9truO-7NjkSi9y-mRTUo0x64CLzY9Nb6Cp_n4JCmo1o8

https://thecurrentga.org/2021/07/01/savannah-chatham-schools-to-limit-student-bus-transportation/?fbclid=IwAR1hrFoYAOVYZLHWwrIA6r7-UItbOeEMSjnDpI4UJyZoLR-7UYdF6aHgYVQ

https://www.lizrichardscreates.com