

Hello my name is Charlotte McCracken and I am the K-4 Science Specialist at Bache-Martin School, a K-8 Philadelphia public school. I am a proud public school teacher and member of The Philadelphia Federation of wTeachers.

This September, I will begin my 5th year in what I can unequivocally say is the best job I've ever had. I love my school, its diverse students, and the supportive community at Bache-Martin. Because I teach a subject I love, at a school that I love, one of my favorite places to be is often in my classroom.

The elementary science room is a place where if you were to peek in, you would see students engaged in hands-on activities and experiments every class period. Using LEGO Education kits to make and model simple machines, investigating how sound travels by designing and building their own musical instruments, or dissecting owl pellets to learn about food webs. In room 131 students are constantly making observations, collaborating, and sharing out their findings and discoveries with one another. Sometimes science even spills out into the hallways when students need more room to test the race cars they built during the energy unit, or to expand on their marble roller coaster as we explore forces and motion.

This past spring, when schools abruptly closed on Friday, March 13th, I did the only thing I could think to do. I planned. Through Google Docs and the Class Dojo App I sent links to science podcasts, animal web cams from zoos and aquariums, NASA's YouTube channel, and the passcodes for the online curriculum I use in the classroom. I shared everything that could be accessed on any device to my students and their families in an effort to keep kids connected and engaged. I tried to check in as much as I could through Class Dojo and email.

Once the School District of Philadelphia distributed laptops and we began true online instruction, my dining room and garden became the classroom. I didn't want 2nd grade to miss out on the owl dissection so we did it through Google Meets on my dining room table. Kindergarten and 1st grade students were still able to learn about the life cycles of plants. Through Google Meets students showed me container gardens of tomato and pepper plants that filled porches, backyards and city stoops. I assigned school wide STEM challenges that had students using cardboard boxes, and other household items to make arcade games as a way to review simple machines. Siblings, parents, grandparents, and cousins all took part to help make sure that science was still happening.

I have struggled and continue to struggle as I come to terms with not being able to physically set up my science lab at the end of August. While I want nothing more than to be setting up lab tables and experiment kits, I know it is currently unsafe to do so.

You see, one of my favorite things about my school is that it is made up of two of the most beautiful 84 and 100 hundred year old buildings in Philadelphia. Buildings that are filled with marble, plaster and cozy little rooms with unique layouts. It is that very fact, these lovely old brick and stone buildings with their amazing architecture features that make it currently unsafe to return.

Bache-Martin, like many Philadelphia school buildings, is in dire need of facilities updating. Asbestos is still an issue; more damaged pipe insulation was found in a classroom as recently as July 20, 2020. Poor ventilation is a major concern, with some rooms that are used by staff and students only having one or two windows. Our small windows currently do not open more than 6 inches, allowing for minimal air flow circulation. Bache-Martin is one of the 171 School District of Philadelphia schools that have been documented as having ventilation systems that aren't up to current codes, according to a July 28th WHYY and Philadelphia Public School Notebook article. According to that same article "experts worldwide agree that poorly ventilated indoor air is one of the major risk factors for COVID-19 transmission."

In a school that has 33% of its student population receiving special education services and many students suffering with asthma and other medical conditions, spending 7 hours a day in a poorly ventilated building puts them at a greater risk. The CDC and AAP recommend utilizing outdoor spaces as much as possible. Bache-Martin benefits from having a courtyard garden and other outdoor spaces that could be used in fair weather, and I have joined a committee of staff and parents to begin to figure out how to best utilize those spaces when we return to our buildings. I have also added tents and canopies to my Amazon back to school list and received 2 as donations from friends. Many city schools do not have safe outdoor spaces to hold classes and activities outside, so unfortunately this solution is not an option for a large majority of Philadelphia school children.

Ventilation is not our only area of concern. School buildings across the state, need plumbing updates such as more and better sinks to allow for proper hand washing to

take place. Cleaning supplies, especially those needed to sanitize the surfaces that multiple students and staff touch daily are hard to find and expensive.

These needed facilities upgrades are not new and are not only needed in response to COVID-19. Asbestos has been a known problem in Philadelphia for decades, as has the fact that many of our schools are still operating original heating and cooling systems that were first put in place when these buildings were built in the 1930s, 40s and 50s. No, COVID-19 did not cause these problems, it's just the most recent factor that underscores the deep and ever widening gap in educational resources between well-funded and underfunded school districts.

The School District of Philadelphia is starting the school year virtually. The School District and the city have laid out a plan that will make sure that every District student has a Chromebook and internet access. The District has also outlined an ambitious and costly plan to make many of the much needed repairs that I have stated above to its over 200 school buildings in order for students and staff to be able to return safely after the first marking period. Myself and fellow teachers are attending virtual PDs and working hard to make sure our 135,000 students have engaging content and meaningful interactions this fall. I know that nothing will replace live face to face instruction and I am looking forward to the day that we all can safely return to Room 131 at Bache-Martin.