

CEHD Outstanding Graduating Student Reflects on Teaching During a Pandemic and What Comes Next

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Ruth Julia O’Coffey Hertrick (class of 2020) has always had a mind for teaching and an interest in schools. Her mother was a school-based therapist, so her exposure to education as a career path started early.

Ruth’s name may be familiar to our College of Education & Human Development community because she was selected as the Outstanding Graduating Student & Banner Bearer for the December 2020 Commencement Ceremony. She was also the recipient of several academic and departmental awards for her outstanding academic performance in the department of Special Education, Early Childhood and Prevention (SECP).

Since graduation, Ruth has remained in the greater Louisville area, largely because of the negative effects of the pandemic on the job market. She continued to educate herself outside of the classroom by reading scholarly journals, and by dedicating a portion of her time as a tutor for students with moderate to severe disabilities in a local school.

As she described it, being a student-teacher during the pandemic was an exercise in flexibility, grace, and discipline.

“No two days were ever alike,” she explained. “I would wake up and just wait for instructions via email because we were just trying to figure out how to adapt. We were waiting on instructions from the state, and there was a lot of hope that we could return to normal a lot sooner.”

As schools tried to figure out how to deliver high-caliber teaching practices, she also noticed that her special needs students needed more support and advocacy.

“Over the course of the pandemic, I think that special education teachers were left on their own with limited guidance and collaboration with administrators,” Hertrick explained. “All of a sudden, we also had to teach parents, as well as their students, about technology, and some behavior tracking that before they didn’t know how to do.”

She also had to learn new technological skills and teach others how to use them. Despite the added effort, Hertrick explains that these moments reinforced her decision to pursue this career path, and her supervising teachers provided her with guidance and opportunities for innovation.

“Google classroom was a great advantage to us, once we learned how to make it work for us, and to teach the students how to use it. The Jam Board was also a terrific way to collaborate together.”

The importance of supportive teachers and supervisors was a running theme and an important one, especially as she prepares to move and begin her full-time position with [Uncommon Schools Kings Elementary](#) in Brooklyn, New York.

“The culture of continuous improvement and investment in teacher development drew me to this position,” Hertrick explained as she discussed the upcoming transition. “I also liked their mission of providing high-quality education to underserved African American and Latino students living in various New York boroughs. During my school-based training, I saw the importance of promoting student success for all students, and I fully believe that all students can be successful.”

The CEHD wishes Julia the best as she moves to the next step in what is sure to be a successful career.

