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Catholic Schools ready for distance learning

SAN BERNARDINO— With the closing of schools across the state and nation to prevent the spread of COVID-19, virtual learning has gone from an aspirational idea to the only game in town.

Beginning in mid-March, Catholic schools in the Diocese began closing their campuses as their corresponding public school districts did the same. On Apr. 2 Superintendent of Catholic Schools Sam Torres announced, in step with the directive from the State of California, that Catholic school campuses in the Diocese would be closed for the remainder of the academic year.

This new reality has compelled a complete and rapid transition to Distance Learning, and the Catholic schools of the Diocese are embracing the challenge.

“Our Catholic school administrators and teachers have successfully redefined the delivery of education in a remarkably short period of time,” says Torres.

Many have been aided by the fact that they have built a solid foundation in recent years by weaving digital elements into their curriculum.

“We’re trying to keep everything as it was before,” says Tish Godsey, who teaches sixth grade homeroom and Junior High Religion at Our Lady of the Assumption School in San Bernardino. “We’re able to teach like we’re in the classroom.”

At OLA that means having set class periods, taking roll, discussing lessons as a class through video conferencing and turning in assignments – all from the comfort of the students’ (and, in some cases, teachers’) homes. The school had already equipped students with their own iPad for use at school and at home and had implemented the Schoology Learning Management System (LMS). An LMS is a technology platform used to assign, track, document and transmit educational content such as assignments, lectures, videos, tests and papers.

To maintain the interactive nature of classroom instruction many schools have used video conferencing technology like Zoom, which St. Theresa School Technology Coordinator Maureen Kennedy describes as “like FaceTime on steroids.”

Andrew Ramirez, Principal of St. George School in Ontario, said his school didn’t initially include that interactive element and leaned on prepackaged paper assignments and digital packets.

“It was very impersonal,” Ramirez said. “We saw that and made a significant change.”

St. George’s upper grade classes now meet daily to learn and discuss lessons through Zoom.

“The kids are excited to see each other, to see their teacher,” said Ramirez. “You see kids actively taking notes during the sessions.”

At St. Theresa School each classroom teacher sends a message to their students outlining learning expectations for the day. Each class receives two periods worth of face-to-face instruction per week using Zoom, and small reading and math groups interact throughout the week using Google Meet.

The Catholic schools use technology to try to maintain a sense of normalcy and continuity, but all acknowledge that students have different situations at home – some have younger siblings to care for, parents at work and unable to help them, or a lack of access to technology. This requires flexibility and sometimes an adjustment of learning expectations. In the Coachella Valley, a hotspot in the initial outbreak of COVID-19 in Riverside County, many St. Theresa school parents work in health care, Kennedy said.

“Some of our families are really struggling,” she said. “We have no control of the students’ learning environments right now.”

Adds St. George’s Ramirez, “It’s about trying to find a balance. The school has to be understanding that everyone has a different situation. Most of our school parents are working from home and they still have responsibilities to meet.”

Maria Martinez, a small business owner with three children at Our Lady of the Perpetual Help School in Riverside, admits that it’s been quite an adjustment.

“Sometimes juggling my work, the household and now distance learning is very trying,” she says. “But as parents we have to have patience, an open mind and remember that their education is also priority.”

Martinez said the response from OLPH teachers has been thorough and consistent.

“The teachers have been in communication on a daily basis, both via email and uploading all of the student’s work online via Google Classroom... they’re having virtual classroom sessions twice a day with the kids. They make all assignments clear and let the children know their expectations on the assignments that need to be turned in. They also developed YouTube videos to make sure that the children have educational instruction available on new lessons.”

The Catholic high schools of the Diocese have found themselves even better prepared for the switch to Distance Learning because students have been receiving instruction and completing and turning in work through devices for the past several years.

Students at both Aquinas and Notre Dame high school have been using iPads at a ratio of one device per student for several years, leaving behind paper assignments and tests, and hardbound textbooks.

“Most of our work was done with technology anyway so there was not much of a change,” says Aquinas freshman Abby Barrows, who spends most of the day working through assignments given by her teachers while also receiving interactive instruction through Zoom sessions.

Still, for Barrows and most Catholic school students something obvious is missing.

“I miss all of my friends, and the social interaction with everyone at school.”

With campuses empty, the sense of community and fellowship so prevalent in Catholic schools has been difficult to replicate. At Redlands Sacred Heart Academy, Principal Angela Williams has attempted to recreate the school’s prayerful morning assembly with a virtual prayer service offered on YouTube. St. Theresa’s recently held a “Virtual Spirit Week,” inviting students to post photos on Instagram reflecting the theme of each day.

Many Catholic school teachers say they block out time during the video conferencing discussions with students to invite them to share any thoughts they would like to offer on how the pandemic is

impacting them and their families. There are also scheduled times for class prayer and faith sharing. Patrick McCaw, third grade teacher at OLPH, Riverside, asked his student to use their Chromebooks to conduct video interviews with their parents about interesting stories from their family history. He says he thinks the “community spirit” of Catholic schools has survived the digital transition.

Aquinas junior Gabriela Zendejas says her Catholic faith has helped guide her through the big changes in learning brought on by the pandemic.

“It helps me to continue to have hope,” she says. “I can definitely say I’ve grown closer to God during this time because I’ve had a lot of time to think and pray.”

Martinez agrees, and says the stay-at-home order has provided her family a blessing.

“I now find myself spending much needed time with my fast-growing children, listening to their stories, helping them and getting to know them again.”

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