

PANDEMIC ACADEMICS

By Dave Glaser



How do we do this? What will it look like? *Are we ready?*

Teachers across the country were asking these questions and many others in August as they prepared for the beginning of the academic year. While each school faced its own unique challenges because of the coronavirus pandemic, there was no denying one thing they all shared in common: the familiar and comfortable routine teachers have become accustomed to when opening their classrooms to students was going to be turned on its head. The real question was, how much?

Faculty members at Saint Stephen's were no different. Although they adapted quickly and admirably to distance learning when the campus shut down from March through the end of the 2019-20 school year, re-opening for in-person instruction while still under strict health and safety protocols would be a different animal altogether.

"I think we were genuinely excited to come back. The spring made us realize how important it was to be on campus, but there were still a lot of unknowns," Intermediate School teacher Tanya Creneti said. "We always feel a little pressed for time, so I think with having to be aware of health precautions we wondered how this was all going to work. I'd be lying if I didn't tell you it was nerve-racking at first."

Opening school not only presented a challenge to the SSES faculty as a whole, but many times each division, grade level, and classroom faced its own unique circumstances. Often, that was based on how many virtual students needed to be integrated into the classroom on a real-time basis. Some subject areas also lend themselves more to social distancing than others.

Third-grade teachers Lee Ann Pritchett and Amy Ivin began their year with the highest number of online students of any grade – nine. That meant they had to reconsider how they approached their preparation and how they addressed their classrooms to ensure that students who were live-streaming in via laptop could stay engaged and feel part of the lessons.



"I just have to think a little differently. I can't point the laptop screen toward the other students in the classroom, because that would be distracting. But if I walk away from the screen to another part of the room, they can't see me," Pritchett said. "It's things like that where I have to be aware. We're kind of writing the book as we go. I tell the kids, 'We are warriors! We are making history!'"

While the true impact of what is now nearly a year of U.S. education altered by the pandemic will take time to fully determine, a study published in October 2020 of more than five million math and reading assessments in grades 1-8 indicates there is work ahead. Achievement in reading is, on average, one percentile point below where it should be in a normal school year. Math achievement has been more significantly affected, falling an average of seven points. According to the study, translated in terms of instructional time, students in grades 4-7 will need 4-7 weeks to catch up in reading, while grades 1-3 and 8 are on track. Students in grades 5 and 6 are more than 12 weeks behind beginning-of-year expectations in math, and students in grades 2, 3, 4, 7, and 8 will need 4-11 weeks to meet the expectations of a typical school year. The analysis included students in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. Schools involved were in suburban, urban and rural areas, serving various income levels, and approximately 85-percent were public.

By comparison, at Saint Stephen's the overall feeling is that students are well on schedule. In fact, they may actually be ahead. With limited movement on campus, no field trips, and assemblies and school-wide gatherings now held via videoconference, there are fewer interruptions to the school day. Those limitations, however, do impact the vibrant school culture that helps to make SSES such a unique community. Great care has been taken to make sure those traditions continue – even if they look different.

"We're all about building community here. We're used to seeing parents on campus, so it's definitely different when the first time I see a parent's face is on a screen during conference time," Creneti said. "But one thing I think all of this has done is it has led to a lot of great conversations and empathy. When I listen to the kids, I hear them relating to each other's experiences. I hear them talking about how this is affecting them and their families – making a friend feel better because they haven't been able to visit grandparents and things like that."

The experience has also provided Saint Stephen's teachers with unexpected opportunities for professional development. Many have discovered virtual discussion groups where they regularly share ideas and resources with peers around the nation and the world. It has also been a crash course in the use of technology as a tool to improve the classroom experience.

Teachers have become experts with a variety of hardware and software that help them do their jobs. In the Upper School, Charity Clough's chemistry students use Facetime to bring virtual students into their group lab work.

"Many of us had never heard of Zoom," Clough joked. "I'm not sure anyone had ever done this kind of daily simultaneous teaching before with some students here, some at home. It has changed our rhythm, but we've gotten comfortable with the technology and the kids are super adaptable. I'm really paperless at this point. With a tool like Classkick, I can see the students writing in real time on my screen and work along with them."

A year ago, it would have been rare to see a Saint Stephen's classroom set up with aligned rows of student desks facing a teacher at a whiteboard. Social distancing requirements have made that more traditional setup the norm. For Pritchett, it reminds her of her own school days.

"I've never had to stand in front of them so much because we're typically working in groups and I'm moving from group to group. But I still try to make things fun," she said. "It's made me realize I can do things that I didn't think I could. The kids make you strong. Their attitude helps our attitude."

Creneti agrees.

"This age group wants to be here. Their enthusiasm is high. We can find new ways to do things and they've learned that about themselves," she said. "We'll all be glad when this pandemic is over, but we've found new opportunities to collaborate with each other. We're more nimble, flexible and resourceful."

