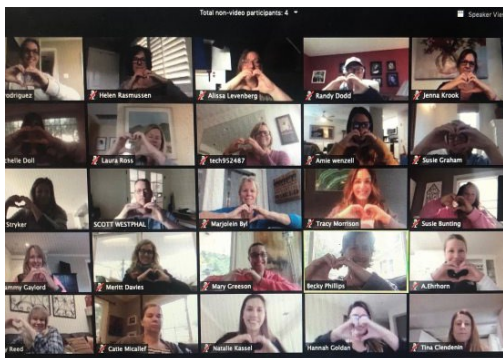


Published May 27th, 2020

Distance learning - lessons learned

By Pippa Fisher



Burton Valley teachers on a Zoom conference show their heart. Image provided

what he describes as a "leap of faith" for families and teachers, he says, "We had to build a template for online lessons, we had to introduce new technology platforms, especially in the early elementary grades, to teachers and families, and we had to get lesson plans to be accessible online, no matter what the device you might be using in your home."

Faced with reinventing teaching methods, Whitmore acknowledges there were no shortcuts. "It takes a lot of elbow grease and even more time to get an online lesson ready than it does to create a classroom-based lesson plan," he says.

Burton Valley Elementary School fourth-grade teacher Natalie Kassel certainly agrees. "In the beginning there was a lot to figure out: how to translate lessons into a digital format, how to create and communicate lesson plans, and how to keep students engaged and part of the class community," she says.

Teachers have been trying to keep broadly to their classroom model of lessons which would typically include a mini lesson, independent work time and sharing at the end. Kassel says that in the digital environment, the mini lesson is a short video, followed by independent work, and finally students are encouraged to share.

Using platforms such as Zoom, Google Classroom and Padlet, teachers hold office hours to support students. Kassel says the process has involved trial and error.

"One issue that occurred was that many students were not actively watching lesson videos, or some skipped the videos altogether before doing related work," says Kassel, which prompted her to introduce a lesson on how to learn from a video, including pausing, re-watching parts, and even taking notes.

"One unexpected bright point about Zoom is that my class is getting to know each other more personally, including pets, siblings, and self-directed projects and boredom busters," noted Kassel, who says that keeping the kids feeling connected and supported is the most important aspect.

Whitmore says that he and his staff aim to stay attuned to students' social and emotional needs. "A big part of social and emotional growth is respect for diversity and an atmosphere of inclusion, and we know the coronavirus has created challenges in supporting a fully-inclusive school community, so we hope to have an eye to that as we welcome everyone back eventually, too."

Whitmore is happy that the community has stayed engaged and made a concerted effort to have their children engage with distance learning. "While there have been families who have let us know it is overwhelming, most everyone has been in regular contact, and as time has passed we have heard from more and more of our families on a regular basis," he says.

The early days were full of complex decisions for Whitmore but he says he is most proud of the collaboration of the district team at every level of the organization.

"The first two weeks of lessons were done with grade level teams led by principals," says Whitmore, noting that the collaboration continued unabated ever since.

"The teachers have been amazing but so have our teams of custodians, maintenance and operations staff,

As the school year draws to a close, in a way no one could have ever imagined last August when it started or even a mere two months ago, lessons have been learned by school administrators, teachers, parents and students after pivoting to the uncharted territory of across-the-board home-based distance learning.

Lafayette Superintendent of Schools Richard Whitmore says that one of the most important lessons is how personalized the shelter-in-place experience is for each individual, both school employees and students.

"Everyone has a different set of responsibilities in his or her own home, and we have needed to acknowledge that," says Whitmore. "I know there is a lot of 'after dinner' work that has been accomplished by teachers as well as by students."

Whitmore says the hardest part was getting started. In

aides jumping in to lend a hand. Everyone has risen to the occasion and I can honestly say not a single employee of the district has contacted me to complain about having to empty out our schools or having to conduct distance learning."

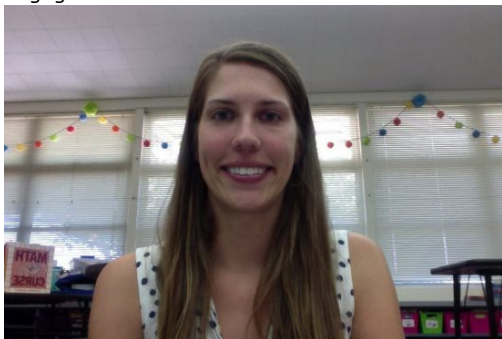
Using a diverse array of tools - packets or home-based materials, occasional small group settings for some, new products or new uses for old products, the teachers are hoping to reach all students, recognizing that some will thrive and others will find distance learning more challenging.

Whitmore encourages parents to support their children's education over the summer. "Read together as a family, talk about the books you are reading, stay physically active, ensure there's an opportunity for social and emotional learning in the midst of all of this," he says.

"If you hear from a teacher that your student may be challenged in the core curriculum, especially reading, writing or math, make sure you have resources available to keep your student engaged over the summer," he says, noting the district will make resources available via their website and will be keeping online programs open for the summer when it makes sense to do so.

Whitmore hopes to know better what the next school year will look like over the next month or so.

Kassel says looking at the next school year brings many unknowns. "We do not know if we will be remote learning, back in the classroom, or a hybrid of the two. Classroom learning enhances peer collaboration, discourse, and immediate teacher support. Online learning facilitates flexibility, self-pacing, and independent study opportunities. We will be intentional in planning for any scenario, trying to maximize student engagement and connection."



Natalie Kassel, Burton Valley fourth-grade teacher Photo provided

Reach the reporter at: pippa@lamorindaweekly.com

[back](#)

Copyright © Lamorinda Weekly, Moraga CA