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## A mosaic of experiences: online schooling

By Sophie Braccini



Emma Pastore at her desk, ready for online learning. Photo Mark Pastore

After a troubled start in the Spring, the fall version of remote learning in Lamorinda comes with many improvements for students and their parents. Families' experiences vary greatly depending on the age of the students, parents' work situation and disposable income, and the children's learning styles and personality. Not surprisingly, most everyone, including parents, children and teachers, hopes that in-person school will start again soon.

Janet Benedict works full time outside her home and so does her husband. They have three children, an 18-year-old daughter who graduated from Miramonte last summer and is now taking online classes at DVC, and two sons in middle school at Orinda Intermediate in sixth and eighth grade. Benedict is quite pleased with the way school is organized this time around. Her daughter is self-sufficient, and her sons are mature enough to be left to their own devices, in synchronous classes in the

morning and often at the Moraga skatepark in the afternoon.

This feeling is shared by many parents of middle school children. Trent Watkins, whose daughter Madison is in sixth grade at Joaquin Moraga intermediate School, says that she rarely needs him for school work and only when there is a technology glitch involved. Mark Patero, father of sixth-grader Emma and eighth-grader Rex, notes that teaching is more structured this school year, that the schedule is easier to follow, and well-organized. Tiraporn Olsen parents a sixth-grader, an eighth-grader and a 10th-grader who are also independent learners who do not stop her from working full time from home. Having the whole family working from home because of COVID has, in fact, freed a lot of time for her as she does not have to commute to San Francisco or pick up her offspring from the multiple outside activities they were typically involved in.

Even if the learning experience has improved a lot compared to the spring, some parents have started or continued to organize "learning pods" where students meet and work on specific skills. Patero said his daughter invited four friends to join in such a group, both for social interaction and to study. The group will meet twice a week at one of the friends' homes with a math tutor.

Other parents do not want or need to have their child in a pod. The mother of the fifth-grader and seventh-grader, both with Instructional Educational Plans (IEP), and who would rather not be named, said she would not trust the safety of a pod. She has to invest a lot of hours especially with her younger child as he does not like school and is reluctant to participate. The aid that children with an IEP should be getting has not kicked in yet for them in the Moraga School District but contacts have been made. The mother who worked part time was able to reduce her hours in order to support her children.

Emily S., who asked to have her name changed for this article, has a demanding full-time job as well as her husband. The mother of 5-year-old twins in kindergarten confided that she felt stressed, worried, and overwhelmed. Homeschooling two 5-year-olds while trying to work a full-time job at home is virtually impossible, she added. Emily wanted to hire a qualified tutor for a couple hours per day and she interviewed several, but she said they all wanted at least \$40 per hour for at least 25 hours of work per week. She supervises her children's in-class Zoom calls and daily assignments which takes about three hours of her time a day. She feels she is falling behind at work and worried that her children are not getting a quality education.

Watkins says that his sixth-grader can mostly work independently, it is not the case for his third-grader. He notes what a difference it makes to have him available at home and he does not know how he would have done it otherwise. He says that his presence is having a positive influence on his son. Watkins knows not to watch over his son's shoulder during the synchronous lessons as he feels that some struggle may be built in the lesson plan intentionally by the teacher to increase students' resourcefulness.

Not being overly present in the daily school life of young children is a recommendation shared by David Schrag, Orinda school district director of curriculum and instructions. He would like parents to let go as much as possible and let their children have moments of struggle. Schrag has seen how much work teachers have put into the creation of a completely new experience for the children. Even the star teachers that have superb mastery of a live classroom may struggle with Zoom breakrooms and keeping children accountable. They work collaboratively by grade level to establish norms and practices to make sure learning happens, on top of redesigning the curriculum for the new way of delivering it.

Schrag says that most teachers are eager to come back to what they signed up for: live classroom teaching. When that happens is uncertain, but he said that, when it is safe for all, efforts will be made to bring back the younger students and those more in need first.

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