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With buildings closed due to the coronavirus, North Shore private schools turn to virtual classrooms

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By STEVE SADIN
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Students at Our Lady of Perpetual Help School in Glenview and Solomon Schechter Day School of Metropolitan Chicago in Northbrook start their day of remote learning the same way they did when meeting face-to-face. There's announcements, a prayer and then birthday wishes.

Students across Illinois have been forced to shift from learning in their classrooms to receiving their academic training at home as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. For private schools along the North Shore, that means changing instructional approaches while maintaining some classroom traditions.

"We want to give them as much of what they get from day to day as we can," said Lena Kushnir, Schechter's head of school. "We say the Pledge of Allegiance, the prayer for the state of Israel and I wish happy birthday to the students celebrating their birthday."

Amy Mills, principal of Our Lady of Perpetual Help, offers a similar start to the day by sending a video via email to begin the day at 9 a.m.

“Giving them normalcy is important,” Mills said. “We do the announcements and birthday wishes. Sister Paulanne Held leads the Lenten prayer.”

Loyola Academy in Wilmette also starts its day with announcements. Senior Catherine Flannery of Chicago likes the way Principal Charlie Heintz brings some normalcy to her day.

“Mr. Heintz starts us out like he does every day,” Flannery said.

While most North Shore public schools spent the week starting March 16 on spring break, some area parochial schools take their vacation in conjunction with Easter or Passover in April, giving them less time to plan.

Some schools organized their days into regular classes where students would use their electronic devices for online meeting platforms like Zoom, Skype for Business and Google Classroom.

Regina Principal Kassie Porreca said multiple electronic platforms are used depending on the situation. Assignments, homework and videos from teachers are all posted on Google Classroom.

“We do a lot of things to keep education challenging and rigorous,” Porreca said. “They’re still in school and they’re still learning. Each class meets in-person (online) at least twice a week.”

Mark McGuire, a Loyola social studies teacher, said periods are 30 minutes rather than the usual 55 and lunch is eliminated, thereby shortening the day. Students spend less time in front of a screen that way.

“It’s a framework but we have to trim some away so the students still respond to it,” McGuire said. “We’re adapting and try to be successful. By this time of year, the students know the teachers and what’s expected.”

Tony Frank, the head of school at Rochelle Zell, said teachers have the ability to decide which platform to use while conducting remote classes.

“Some of the teachers like to use Skype for Business, while some prefer to use Zoom instead,” Frank said. “They both let the students and teachers interact. I want the teachers to do what will be successful for them and their students.”

Remote learning is not completely new. Most of the schools used the technique last year when school was closed during the frigid days of the polar vortex.

“It let us hit the road running,” said Stephen Schacherer, principal of St. Norbert School in Northbrook. “The faculty and students had a sense for it. We weren’t prepared for two weeks but we are learning. The lesson plans were ready to go and all of our curriculum is being delivered.”

While remote learning allows students to maintain their studies while schools are closed for a prolonged period of time, Heintz said there are shortcomings.

“It’s good we have it in this (currently) not perfect world,” Heintz said. “It’s not a substitute.”

One major challenge is replicating a laboratory setting for sciences like chemistry or physics. Mary Stenson, a math teacher at Regina who oversees English, science and social studies as the curriculum head, said teachers have found a practical way to manage.

“Teachers create videos with a demonstration,” Stenson said. “The science teachers can talk to them about what is being done and they see how it works.” The two weeks of remote learning has had its glitches, but administrators and teachers say they have been able to quickly find solutions. When passwords are forgotten or there is too much online activity in a home, there is help.

One day OLPH's website, an integral part of its e-learning plan, went down for 45 minutes. Mills said it was restored by 9:20 a.m. and that school day got a late start.

"We have problems and we solve them," Mills said. "Our technical department is very responsive. They get the message quickly and take care of it."

Some of the schools have students who do not have internet connections at home, but officials said the situation was remedied. Heintz said Loyola purchased 15 Wi-Fi hot spots and had them delivered where needed.

Several teachers and administrators stressed the need to make sure students who need additional help still get it when they are unable to drop-in for assistance. Nanci Caplan, director of student services at Schechter, said after announcements students go to their homeroom where social and emotional needs are met.

"They talk about the new reality," Kaplan said. "We want them to process it all and express their feelings."

Students approach the day differently. Catherine Flannery at Loyola keeps a strict routine, while Regina junior Anne Berg waits until her first class is over to have breakfast.

Not required to wear the school uniform, Berg said some of the time she attends virtual class in her pajamas.

Flannery said keeping her routine intact as much as possible is important.

After she awakes, she dresses for the day and logs onto class.

"It really helps my mental health right now," Flannery said.

While athletic programs are currently shut down, student activities are part of the day at Loyola and Regina. Berg, who is on the student council, said they will be meeting virtually during the week starting March 30.

Flannery said there are student activities at Loyola, too. There was a talent contest where people posted their routines online and students voted on the best.

While the online interaction has helped, she said she wants to make it back to campus this year.

“I miss being with my friends,” Flannery said.

Steve Sadin is a freelance reporter.