



March 24, 2020

Dear Explorer West Families,

Here we are in Week Two of remote learning, and I wanted to share some of my reflections on how it's going so far.

First of all, I am just blown away by the Explorer West community. In the midst of what for most of us is the most unexpected and confounding turn of events of our lives, our students, faculty and staff, and families have shown an unbelievable commitment to supporting one another and upholding our core values of personal and community responsibility, integrity, creativity and inquiry, and confidence:

Our teachers have been creative and tireless in their efforts to adapt and provide a great middle school education and care for students, even from afar, and even when it means fumbling and learning in public.

Our students, as their lives have been upended, have been trying their hardest to stay positive, to work hard, to meet commitments, and be independent, in ways we never would have imagined.

And our families, right in that nexus of school and home, have made it all work by supporting their students AND cheerleading for the school, while also juggling new and intensified work and family responsibilities.

Last week, our focus was on establishing the structures for a remote learning program (the schedule, the platforms, the norms), building skills, troubleshooting, and just seeing what it feels like to jump in. The responses we got from the student, faculty, and family surveys revealed that overall, we met those goals! Families reported that the structure of the daily schedule, the mix of synchronous and asynchronous classes, and the ongoing communication from faculty and staff have been very helpful in maintaining some stability at home and a focus on learning and well-being. Students have been very happy to be able to continue working and learning and to see the faces of their teachers and classmates. They shared a lot of appreciation for the patience and flexibility of their teachers, and the independence they are being given.

The teachers also reported feeling good about the first week. One of the teachers shared with me that she appreciates "how everyone, teachers and students, are using their ingenuity to get through this. I feel free to try things with the kids that would make me feel dorky if I did them in person." Another

wrote, "I am being forced to continue to grow as a teacher. It is honing my skills and encouraging me to dig deeply into my toolbox and unearth things I had forgotten or had never used."

While the responses were overwhelmingly positive, some themes emerged around things to keep working on. We all recognize the importance of social connections, and want to find additional ways to help foster those while we're all in our own homes. And, we know that a work load or a level of structure or even screen time that feels "just right" to many can feel too much or not enough for others. This is even more true during a time of crisis. We all need to work together to find the right balance, putting the overall wellness of our students in the forefront. As we move forward with this, we will also be able to refine our approaches to assessment, student support, and family communication, and to find more opportunities for meaningful group work and creative endeavors. Well, we seem to be in this for the long haul, so we have time to keep improving our approach to remote learning, and to monitor changing needs as we go!

You may have seen from my daily schedule emails that we have instituted a couple new structures this week -- a Study Hall/SSR log to help students and their advisors keep track of how students are managing their independent work time, and Office Hours at 3pm to facilitate some social hang-out time, convene clubs, or get support in Language Lab and Pi Eaters. (Why not at lunch time? The strong consensus among the faculty is that we need a mid-day break from screens.) Behind the scenes, the teachers have been sharing what they've learned with each other (and from peer schools) so that they can continue growing in this new realm. It's hard for this group of overachieving educators to remember that we are brand new beginners all over again, but we are committed to providing our students with the best experience we can. We are pacing ourselves and celebrating every win.

The most important advice I can give you right now is to remember that you know your child's needs and your family's needs better than anyone, and if you need to make adjustments to best support them, we are behind you. The partnership between school and home has never been as important (or as literal) as it is right now. We are relying on you to let us know what you need, whether it's in terms of academics, mental health, or anything else. Need to take a break, or relax expectations in some way when everyone at home is stretched thin? Get in touch with any of us and we will work it out together. **Student-led conferences are coming up April 3 and 6 (see the note in the bulletin about rescheduling them over two days instead of one), but please do not wait until then to talk with us if you have anything on your mind.**

On another front, while we know school will not open any earlier than April 24, we also know that restrictions could last longer and we are trying our best to plan for that. We are starting to look at all the events on our school calendar, thinking about the essential goals behind them, and planning for how they may be reenvisioned if necessary. I know that many of you will be eager to help us make the most of those opportunities, so stand by for more! And please, **join us if you can this Thursday, March 24, at 8:45, for a Family Network meeting via Zoom (look for the link in today's bulletin).**

We are truly in this together!

Barbara