



April 21, 2020

Dear Explorer West Families,

Welcome back from a Spring Break like no other. I enjoyed getting to slow down a little, ending my workdays a little earlier, and spending sunny afternoons with my family. I also started knitting a “quarantine sweater” for my niece using only my random scrap yarn leftover from other projects. *(Why for my niece? Because, uncharacteristically, I just started knitting without planning or measuring, and it turns out it’s her size and -- luckily -- she wants it!)* It feels good to be able to create something spontaneous and colorful right now. I hope your families enjoyed some unexpectedly fun moments last week as well.

Yesterday, as you know, the faculty and staff gathered for a Professional Development day with me. We reviewed the feedback from the family and student surveys from last week and shared our own assessments of how our Remote Learning program is going so far. We focused on three general areas: schedule and structure, “classroom” management and curriculum, and school culture and student well being. It was energizing to affirm our work so far *and* identify some tweaks and next steps as we move into the next stretch. One theme we kept coming back to: **patience and flexibility have been the secret to our success**. Here are some highlights for you in each area:

Schedule and Structure

Overall, student and family feedback confirmed the faculty’s hunch that **the schedule we started with is worth sticking to, and I will continue to send daily emails with details**. The pace, level of structure, and flexibility seem to be working. We also recognized the importance of having a few breaks here and there, for faculty and for families, so we scheduled them in. Days to note:

- Friday, May 8: NO CLASSES - Community Service Day
- Friday, May 22: NO CLASSES - Professional Development Day
- Monday, May 25: NO CLASSES - Memorial Day

To help families plan ahead, and schedule outside lessons or activities, **we are attaching our typical two-day schedule, along with a calendar for the next six weeks and links to each teacher’s “Zoom Room.”** There may be minor switches or adjustments on certain days, but hopefully having this information will make things easier for everyone. We will also post this on our website for reference, but without the links to teachers’ Zoom Rooms. We are still working on plans for the final two weeks of school, so you will not see a schedule yet for June.

Despite occasional glitches, Zoom is working well for us. We are also happy, overall, with the way Google Classroom helps students and teachers keep work organized. It’s important to know though that **we want all students to continue using their paper planners!** While it’s overwhelming for some, many students appreciate seeing the list of assignments in Google Classroom (or the calendar view of deadlines it provides). However, it is our belief that continuing to update their own planners is an important step to owning and managing their workflow that we want all students to master while in middle school. Teachers and advisors are periodically checking from “across the screens,” but we are missing our in-person Planner

Parties. **If you're able, you can help by scheduling a time, once or twice a week, to walk through your child's planner together, matching assignments up with what's in Google Classroom, and helping reinforce the skill of noting not just deadlines but when the actual work will happen.** We thank you, and, eventually, your children will thank you too :)

Classroom Management and Curriculum

The adjustment to online classes has been different for everyone, especially in terms of video conferencing. We know that some kids look forward to seeing others on screen and being seen, and for some, it's excruciating. Teachers are continuing to learn new ways of using the tools, becoming more adept at eliciting meaningful participation, and being choosy about when to keep students together versus sending them off on their own. We would like your help in reinforcing the message that **cameras should stay on, and faces in view, while class is in session.** There are times and reasons that teachers are willing to be flexible about that, but that requires communication with the teachers!

One thing we are realizing is that remote learning (like many other things in life) is going much more smoothly for students who are already pretty good at **advocating for themselves.** When students ask for help or adjustments in this environment, they typically get it. For other students, teachers still realize when help is needed and will reach out to students and families, but the feedback loop can be a little slower than it is when we're all together. This is another place where we'd like to ask for your support. Teachers are happy to meet during off-times like Study Hall (if they're not teaching) or Office Hours (or lunch in a pinch, though we'd all rather see everyone off screens then). We are also beginning to have some "staffed" Study Halls where anyone can drop in for extra help or motivation. Do you believe your child needs some extra attention, accommodation, motivation, or challenge? Encourage your child to reach out, or go ahead and make the connection for them via email with their advisor or subject-area teacher, cc'ing your child. Or reach out yourself if a quick check-in would help. **Learning remotely requires an extraordinary (and unreasonable, really) amount of independence from our middle schoolers, and we need to work together to provide as much scaffolding as we can to help them succeed.**

Assessment looks different in this learning environment as well. Some things to expect in terms of end-of-year evaluations:

- Teachers will be sharing brief outlines late next week of the major skills and content that students will be evaluated on second term. Teachers have needed to make changes (for some, minor edits, but for most, major revisions) in what they're doing and what they're asking of students. We thought it would be helpful for you all to see those.
- Teachers are providing students with more flexibility in how they show mastery of skills and concepts. For example, while students are always allowed to retake tests or revise papers, now, their newer and more successful attempts will be weighted much more heavily.
- **We know that this situation requires more flexibility, and our teachers are willing to be flexible with deadlines and workloads. It is very important, though, that students and families communicate with the teachers to let them know what you need!!**
- **8th grade only:** We will continue to assign letter grades to 8th graders, *generally speaking*, and do everything we can to support students so that their grades are at least as high as they were before remote learning began. If you believe this will negatively impact your family, please let us know as soon as possible so we can work through it together. Again, patience and flexibility are the name of the game.

School Culture and Student Well-Being

The biggest challenge for us continues to be caring for our community from afar, and I am running out of time and digital real estate here to share all of my own thoughts on this topic! Many of the things we talked about yesterday in this category have been addressed above, in

terms of how we partner with all of you to make sure we are truly seeing and supporting each of our students. Some other next steps for us, either in the works or already launched, are:

- More fun, nonacademic activities worked into the schedule, like Jackbox games competitions between advisories, or teacher-led activities during Office Hours.
- Advisory Olympics! And some sort of stand-in for our beloved Chariot Races.
- Continuing with student-initiated Spirit Days.
- Developing meaningful activities to organize in place of our Outdoor Ed trips.
- Partnering with families to develop options for Community Service Day (May 8), and fun non-academic activities on the May 22 PD Day.

Your ideas and partnership are welcome! As you very well know, we can't do this without you.

A few quick notes about Zoom:

Along with the rest of the world, we've certainly learned a lot about the benefits and pitfalls of relying on Zoom. I'm sure you've all seen the horror stories in the news (or perhaps you've experienced them personally) of meetings being crashed, etc. Here are the practices we have put in place to protect ourselves and maintain safe boundaries, and the things you should know about Zoom:

- We never share Zoom links publicly (on websites, social media, etc.).
- All meetings and classes are password-protected.
- Teachers use "waiting rooms" and only admit names they recognize. (*That's why we don't let kids change their Zoom names!*)
- Teachers control screen sharing.
- Any one-on-one meetings between students and teachers happen in the teachers' "Zoom Rooms" with links accessible to all families (see attached schedule) or are scheduled via email with families cc'ed. (like meeting with a student at school with the door open.)
- While we do set up "break-out rooms" within Zoom where students may be working together unattended, the teachers can pop into those rooms at any time. We *do not* set up Zoom meetings for students without an adult presence.
- By using Zoom we are tacitly agreeing to their Terms of Service, which you can read [here](#).

Thanks for reading such a long letter. As always, please reach out to me or anyone on our team with ideas, questions, help needed or offered, or just to check in.

Warmly,



Barbara