



THE CATHOLIC DIOCESE OF ROCKVILLE CENTRE

Office of Communications • *The Long Island Catholic* • *Fe Fuerza Vida*

50 North Park Avenue, Rockville Centre, NY 11570

Tel: 516-678-5800, ext. 221 • Fax: 516-594-0984 • www.drvc.org

CONTACT: Sean Dolan/516-510-0473/sdolan@drvc.org

July 15, 2020

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

CATHOLIC SCHOOLS IN DIOCESE OF ROCKVILLE CENTRE RISE TO THE CHALLENGE OF REMOTE LEARNING

Curriculum Leads Remote Learning Program Receiving High Marks from Parents



From left: Kerry Kahn, Principal, Long Beach Catholic Regional School; Dr. Valerie Serpe, Principal, St. Thomas the Apostle School; Abbey Swiatkowski, principal, St. John Paul II Regional School and Julie O'Connell, Principal, St. Aidan's Catholic School.

ROCKVILLE CENTRE, NEW YORK – July 15, 2020 – As the COVID-19 pandemic closed elementary school buildings in the Diocese of Rockville Centre in March, principals and teachers faced a significant challenge: How could they engage students through remote learning from home?

Working together, the diocese's Department of Education and the Morning Star Initiative team (see morningstarinitiative.org) found a solution: the Curriculum Leads program, which allows teachers to pool resources and share expertise with other grade-level and subject-area teachers from Catholic schools around the diocese.

The program empowers strong teachers and builds a community of support for teachers at every grade level and subject. Its efforts have been met with positive feedback from teachers, parents and students. In addition to participating in the Curriculum Leads program, individual schools also found solutions to the unique challenges of their school community. This article profiles the Curriculum Leads program in action at Long Beach Catholic Regional School, Long Beach; St. Thomas the Apostle Catholic School, West Hempstead; St. John Paul II Regional School, Riverhead and St. Aidan's Catholic School, Williston Park.

Long Beach Catholic Regional School started planning for remote learning several weeks prior to the school closing; however, once the governor announced the closing of school buildings, the principal and faculty had to work fast. "Our challenge was that we were instantly apart and



THE CATHOLIC DIOCESE OF ROCKVILLE CENTRE

Office of Communications • *The Long Island Catholic* • *Fe Fuerza Vida*

50 North Park Avenue, Rockville Centre, NY 11570

Tel: 516-678-5800, ext. 221 • Fax: 516-594-0984 • www.drvc.org

needed to regroup and plan through Google Meets and Zooms,” said Principal Kerry Kahn. “The solution was to meet frequently with smaller groups of grades — nursery/pre-kindergarten; kindergarten, first and second grades; third through fifth grades and middle school.”

Working in these small groups, the Long Beach Catholic Regional School staff was able to come up with plans that included how to best utilize Google Classroom, determining how many Google Meets per week would occur, a way to maintain accountability for students and also a way to touch base with students to gauge their needs and home life in a nonintrusive manner. “We would then meet as a faculty to share success stories and share concerns and any issues,” Kahn said.

For St. Thomas the Apostle Catholic School in West Hempstead, “the greatest challenge faced by [the school] community throughout the pandemic was the ability to provide the emotional support desperately needed by all members of our faith community without being able to be physically present to one another,” said Principal Dr. Valerie Serpe. “Moving to the remote learning environment raised many questions for schools in terms of the ability to lead meaningful instruction in a virtual environment.”

The St. Thomas the Apostle School faculty was able to quickly implement and provide high-quality and meaningful instruction for students from day one of the governor’s stay-at-home order. But more support was needed.

“What emerged as the larger challenge was how to adequately support the basic human needs of our students to guide and nurture their minds, hearts and spirits through the incredibly difficult times created by COVID-19,” Serpe said. “As we know from Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, basic needs must be met for learning to be possible.”

In addition to faculty and staff strategically providing opportunities for social interaction among students each day in their Google Classrooms, the school took extra steps to add layers of emotional and spiritual support for school families.

These interventions included weekly Zoom meetings with parents led by two licensed clinical social workers (who are also parents at the school), Google Classroom check-ins three times per week by interns from Adelphi School of Social Work, emotional-support videos created and made available from the school psychologist (provided through the West Hempstead School District), 24/7 spiritual support provided by the church’s pastor and 24/7 hotline access to the principal’s cell phone.

For St. John Paul II Regional School in Riverhead, “one of the biggest challenges of remote learning was preparing the teachers and students to switch from traditional learning inside the classroom to running virtual classes in a short period of time,” said Principal Abbey Swiatkowski. “Additionally, [we had to instruct] the teachers on how to prepare lessons that they typically teach in school for Internet delivery.”

Moving classrooms to home was also a challenge — some teachers needed devices, printers and other materials. However, the school was able to overcome the obstacle. “Our teachers have had



THE CATHOLIC DIOCESE OF ROCKVILLE CENTRE

Office of Communications • *The Long Island Catholic* • *Fe Fuerza Vida*

50 North Park Avenue, Rockville Centre, NY 11570

Tel: 516-678-5800, ext. 221 • Fax: 516-594-0984 • www.drvc.org

extensive professional development in blended learning since the beginning of last year,” Swiatkowski said. “Blended learning is using a mixture of devices and traditional brick-and-mortar instruction. When we were asked to create a remote learning plan, we immediately went into action.”

First, the school’s STREAM (science, technology, reading, engineering, arts and math) teacher, Jacklyn Paoli, worked with the teachers to set up Google Meets for their classes. In turn, the teachers showed their students how to use the technology.

“All students at our school are one-to-one with devices,” Swiatkowski said. “We surveyed the parents on who would need a device and sent devices home ahead of time in order to be prepared. Our teachers were surveyed and anyone who needed supplies were lent printers and devices.”

St. Aidan Catholic School in Williston Park was prepared for the sudden shift to remote learning — it already used Google Classroom for students in grades 5 through 8, so it quickly added those from grades kindergarten through 4 to the learning platform. Teachers were directed to familiarize themselves with Zoom, a video communication application that uses livestreaming.

“As we realized this was not going to be a short-term time away from our buildings, we continued to increase face-to-face time [with students] to every day,” said St. Aidan Principal Julie O’Connell. Next came the need to address early childhood classes.

“The one major challenge we faced as we approached the end of March was how we would continue to service our 124 students in nursery and pre-kindergarten on a virtual platform,” O’Connell said. “The basic structure of an early childhood classroom is completely social and interactive in nature and we feared that we would not be able to provide the high-quality early childhood education our families were accustomed to.”

O’Connell met with the school’s seven nursery and pre-kindergarten teachers to come up with a plan for the remainder of the school year. The teachers took to Zoom using familiar items such as class calendars, weather charts, birthday celebration posters and art supplies and came up with creative ways to continue teaching even the youngest students from home.

Program results at each of the schools left a powerful impression on parents and students. “The decision was made to close our schools, and without missing a beat, our Monday morning prayers and announcements were there to reassure and comfort our Long Beach Catholic School families,” said parent Jenni Weston, whose children are in second and seventh grade at the school. “Our superstar teachers had live, virtual lessons ready to go! The first week in quarantine, LBCRS students were given a full day of lessons, Google Meets and meaningful assignments.”

Students were asked to write letters to residents of nearby nursing homes. They gathered virtually for Masses livestreamed through the BeachCatholic.com website and watched beautiful videos that taught about the Stations of the Cross. They enjoyed a virtual Spirit Week, live art classes, physical fitness challenges, dance-offs, virtual field trips to zoos and museums and an Easter egg hunt. The school collected money to donate treat baskets with messages of support to local



THE CATHOLIC DIOCESE OF ROCKVILLE CENTRE

Office of Communications • *The Long Island Catholic* • *Fe Fuerza Vida*

50 North Park Avenue, Rockville Centre, NY 11570

Tel: 516-678-5800, ext. 221 • Fax: 516-594-0984 • www.drvc.org

hospitals.

“The administration made this transition to online learning appear effortless,” Weston continued. “And yet, behind the scenes, our teachers were working 12 to 15 hours a day to make sure our students would not experience a disruption in learning. To say that LBCRS rose to the occasion would be a severe understatement. Our family is so grateful to be navigating these scary times with the incredible LBCRS family.”

St. Thomas the Apostle Catholic School has received incredibly positive feedback from families and the community for the stellar and well-rounded support in place for all members of the school community,” Serpe said. “We have all learned the importance of collaboration and asking for the assistance from others who bring beautiful gifts and talents to our world.”

“I am so very impressed on how St. Thomas the Apostle is handling this very difficult time,” said an email from parent Laurie Schour, whose son, Teddy, is enrolled at the school. “I am beyond impressed with the daily lessons that have been provided this past week. Seeing familiar faces and daily lessons has given Teddy a sense of normalcy. It also gave me a look inside Teddy’s day-to-day lessons at school. Thank you so much for all that you do for your students. It is evident how much you all love your students, and it is greatly appreciated!”

Parents of students attending St. John Paul II Regional School are extremely happy with the remote learning instruction. “We made sure our delivery was age appropriate and all parents had the resources needed for their children to learn properly from home. Throughout the entire process, our parents were continuously updated and informed of our plans and what to expect week to week, said Principal Swiatkowski.”

Mary Eads, a parent of a seventh grader at the school, recalled how she received a call on March 13 that school buildings were closed but started remote learning that same day. “Since day one our teachers have been dedicated and have gone beyond their roles to make sure our children felt a sense of normalcy,” she said. “The staff had redirected all their lessons to accommodate the new way of learning. Our principal greets our children every day with prayer and asks all the children if they are OK. As parents, we have never been so blessed to have St. John Paul II Regional School as part of our extended family.”

At St. Aidan’s Catholic School, Principal O’Connell said, “we received numerous emails thanking us and praising how the teachers continued to engage and connect with their children via Zoom during these unprecedented times.”

Parent Christina Finn emailed her thanks to nursery teacher Regina Biscardi: “I just wanted to thank you for all of the wonderful things you have been doing for the nursery class. I wasn’t sure how Ethan would respond, but he really enjoys the crafts and activities on his live Zoom meetings. It is important for these little ones to stay connected, and we really appreciate all of your efforts to provide creative learning opportunities. It really makes a difference!”

For more information about the Morning Star Initiative, visit: morningstarinitiative.org. For more



THE CATHOLIC DIOCESE OF ROCKVILLE CENTRE

Office of Communications • *The Long Island Catholic* • *Fe Fuerza Vida*

50 North Park Avenue, Rockville Centre, NY 11570

Tel: 516-678-5800, ext. 221 • Fax: 516-594-0984 • www.drvc.org

information about Catholic schools in the Diocese of Rockville Centre, visit drvcschools.org.