



Finding Strength & Resiliency *in* eLearning

*by Rachel Bucek,
Marketing and Communications Assistant*

This year, schools around the country were faced with a new and unexpected challenge. In February, the U.S. President and the Governor of Illinois issued a stay-at-home order due to the quickly escalating COVID-19 pandemic. We followed those directives to prioritize the health and safety of our staff and families, and temporarily closed our physical campus on March 16th. However, as the situation began to worsen, Governor Pritzker extended all school closures through the end of the 2019-2020 school year.

When concerns began to arise in February, the closure of school was immediate, as was our transition to eLearning. Teachers and Administrators, with the support of the School's Technology Team, worked quickly to adapt to this new teaching and work style. While daunting at times,

we found excitement in eLearning by discovering interactive and creative tools such as Zoom, Flip Grid, Padlet, Seesaw and more that allowed us to connect and support each other during this time. Whether we call it eLearning, remote learning, distance learning, or virtual classrooms, it all refers to the same concept. Students and teachers engaging in the learning process without a shared physical classroom. What seemed impossible only a few short years ago, was suddenly the new normal.

After the initial launch, teachers worked tirelessly to reinvent their curriculum, determined to continue intellectual growth and curiosity in our students, while also providing them with a sense of cohesiveness. Students and teachers adapted to eLearning through virtual classrooms (synchronous learning) and recorded message, stories, and instruction (asynchronous learning).

Faculty and staff also embraced the changes that came with eLearning but looked for unique ways to bring hope and motivation to their students. Social Emotional Learning or SEL would become more important than ever. Faculty work to connect with students who are feeling increasingly disconnected, who miss their friends, who are missing some of their favorite extracurricular school activities such as Chess, Band, Chorus, PE, even lunchtime. Counselors Meghan McCarthy and Angel Van Howe have been sending regular communications to help guide parents through the struggles of parenting and addressing the specific needs of gifted learners.



Our teachers worked hard and seized every opportunity to transform their virtual classrooms into positive and engaging learning environments. For example, Drama Teacher Mr. Jeff Westbrook carried on with his lessons teaching pantomimes to Group 5 students, only this time, students used their school-issued laptops to record their practice and share it with classmates. He, along with Mrs. Barbara Cosentino, also coordinated an ode to Group 8 performing “You are my Sunshine” with the musical stylings of Mrs. Surdynski, Mr. Pawalek, Ms. Hurdle, Mr. Dundek, and Mr. Metcalf to inspire our graduates who are missing some memorable moments in their final year at ACS.

Our Athletic Director and P.E. teacher, Mr. Joe Schallmoser, knew that student spirits and physical activity might be low. He began delivering “Burpees and Bad Dad Jokes” to students across Chicagoland. He traveled more than 500 miles, visiting more than 100 students to provide exercise and laughter to improve mental and physical health. All at a safe distance, of course. Additionally, Mrs. Neha Thakkar, Learning Resource and Media Specialist, never missed a beat when it came to her students interested in learning by hosting a virtual author visit from K-Fai Steele. These practices, amongst many others, transformed the eLearning experience for our students from a scary and uncertain experience into an adventure.



Students experience joy at home through virtual classrooms and eLearning.



Soon-to-be ACS alumni are surprised with yard signs. (top) John "Jack" Geary '20 (bottom) Mahi Shah '20 (right) with sister Mili Shah '15 (left)

Teachers and staff encountered no shortage of trouble: spotty wi-fi, computers on the fritz, login issues, password changes, timing conflicts and more. So far, nothing has stopped us in moving forward as a community to meet the needs of our students. The positive responses and appreciation we received from parents during this time was overwhelming. Watching our community come together in support of one another is something we will never forget.

Parents expressed their concern and care for our teachers during this tough transition, "While the teachers continuously work with our students to strike a balance, we as parents want to give permission to the teachers to find some balance for themselves in all of this. With several more weeks of the school year to go, please pass along our concerns, thoughts, and thanks. ACS is truly a unique community."

Acknowledging the difficulty faced by parents, students, and teachers is necessary to work through this uncertain time. We heard from another parent who reminded us that "Learning to be flexible and adapt to situations is a skill that is invaluable to these children later in life."

We strive for a true partnership between parents and teachers. That relationship has never been more important. Teachers relying on parents to provide real-time support to kids, and parents relying on teachers to reimagine curriculum for a virtual world and be present for their students. Likewise, the Administrative Leadership Team, the Board of Trustees, the Tech Team and all the faculty and staff have banded together in support of students, our mission to serve gifted children, and our desire to provide quality education in the face of incredibly challenging circumstances. We have every confidence our community will come out of this stronger and more resilient.