

Virtual Learning: Maintaining Community and Key Policies

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Facing the COVID-19 crisis, a majority of SAIS schools have had to experiment with distance learning and having staff work from home. This is a fundamental shift for our schools, which tend to be very place-based organizations. It will take time to find the next gear to make the shift to this new online environment, all the while maintaining our education, community, and culture.

Many schools have questions about the basics, such as teleworking policies and agreements. Below you will find information about the “nuts and bolts” as well as sample teleworking policies and agreements. They should work in conjunction with any technology and equipment policies that you have. Schools should understand that many policies that are typically in place to ensure successful teleworking — such as requiring that an employee have a completely separate office space or not have unattended children under the age of 10 or 12 in the house — may not be feasible to enact or uphold at this time. These are challenges that schools and staff will have to work through with a shared understanding and a focus on the long-term picture of delivering great education in a new way.

Beyond these basics, school leaders should also think about the bigger framework of maintaining community and culture during this time. Schools provide an anchor for students, staff, and parents. Working to maintain strong connections while schools go online will make re-entry smoother *and* ensure that the school community and culture remain intact.

Consider the following points as you work to maintain community when your school goes online:

- **You still need your community connections and visibility.** These are two different things, but not dissimilar.
 - **Community.** Teleworking can be a very lonely structure if tools are not used to keep people in touch, and this goes for adults and kids. When you first make the transition to a more virtual environment, you must be very deliberate about the steps you take to maintain community and culture, even online.
 - **Set regular meetings.** These might not be at the same time as your regular staff meetings, but you need those community touches. If you tend to have very large staff meetings, you might still have those, or you might turn those into video messages and add smaller online gatherings where people can readily communicate.
 - **Have regular communications.** Yes, communicate frequently, but also set a predictable rhythm of communications for your staff, students, and families. That way they will know that these regular touches are coming and when. Do not forget the entirety of your staff, including custodial services, bus drivers, part time employees, etc.
 - **If you have large meetings, make opportunities for smaller group**

gatherings as well. These gatherings allow for that casual back and forth you normally get when you come and go from school. Such a gathering need not be long — it could just be a quick check in to see how things are going and where people need help. At SAIS we use a slide-deck and everyone has a slide that provides an update on the week ahead.

- **Don't forget the parents.** This is a perfect time to provide “coffee” opportunities for parents’ associations and other groups that might already have a structure in place. Most private video accounts do not have the ability to bring groups together the way that larger, school-wide accounts do. Parents will also be feeling isolated — from the school and from each other — and are likely to welcome the chance to come together, particularly after the initial shift to online.
- **Visibility.** Some heads have mentioned that they will have a lot more time on their hands after their schools go online. To some degree this is true. However, remember many of the things that kept you busy before were the same things that kept you *visible* — working carpool lines, holding assemblies, meeting with donors, meeting with parents, etc.
 - **If you are a community leader, make sure that you are still visible.** It is much harder to be visible in an online environment than it was in your “normal” environment, where you could be seen walking down the halls. If you know when online meetings are being held, you can “drop-in” for a couple of minutes to see how things are going. You can also do this with synchronous classes. It will ensure that you are still visible and give you a read on how people are doing.
 - **Brainstorm how you can replace some of the community gatherings with online versions.** School assemblies, class meetings, etc. can all have an online counterpart. Particularly if your school remains closed beyond a few weeks, these community gatherings will be fundamental to maintaining your school’s culture and community, as well as your visibility as a leader.
 - **Track the Importance of Visibility as the Situation Evolves.** As communities go further into lockdown, seeing each other is going to be very important. Students will want to see teachers and school leaders to know that “everything is okay.” This is also true for adults, many of whom have never lived in a limited social environment and may not have the technology to touch base with larger groups of people.
- **It is easier to maintain community if everyone is online.**

There are some positions that can serve the school most effectively from the physical building,

such as custodians, grounds crews, etc. Other than those individuals, it will be easier if everyone works online. If some teams meet regularly in person and others do not, it automatically creates “in” and “out” groups with differing access to information and camaraderie. Work hard to avoid this. The same is true for students and teachers. If your teachers are all on campus teaching, they will not naturally understand the challenges students are facing while engaging in distance learning.

- **Flexibility is required and should be embraced.**

One of the gifts of this crisis is seeing how we can re-visit the concept of *time* in our schools. That is going to be crucial to how we think about serving all aspects of our community. While we have been making the shift online, the reality is setting in that many of our teachers have children at home who will now need care. Some staff members are comfortable having care providers come to the house, others are not. It very well might be that eventually all staff with students at home will be doing double duty as both professionals and parents. While “normal” teleworking arrangements almost always provide that working from home should not be done without childcare for children under a particular age, such requirements likely will not be feasible during this time. Schools should also understand that older students may be facing the same conflict if they are expected to care for younger siblings while their parents are working. There are two obvious solutions for this issue; one is to provide asynchronous opportunities for learning, that is, where lessons and work can be done at any time. This allows the teachers to create content off “regular” hours and for students to engage in learning at any time. Some schools have adopted week-long plans where students can make choices every day, with the necessary work being due by the end of the week.

- **Have fun and be free with mistakes.**

Engaging in schooling in this new way can and should be fun. Now, during this chaotic experiment, is a time to be open about mistakes and making them together. Be goofy with things like Zoom virtual backgrounds or other add-ons that technology makes fun. There are more free resources online during this crisis than ever before-- virtual field trips to [museums](#) and [sites](#) around the world, [entire libraries](#) of information, [online videos and resources](#) for all ages (including pre-schoolers), and even just fun things like [daily doodles](#). Educators are supporting and networking with each other better than they have ever done. Now is the time to take advantage of this collective opportunity and see what we can do with it.

The Nuts and Bolts of Teleworking Success

A lot of questions have come up around how to make teleworking really work. Two critical elements of successful teleworking relate to communicating clear expectations and setting good habits from the start. Schools are developing insights as they go, but being clear on the following items will help you get going.

- Have supervisors check-in with their teams regularly and in one-on-one settings to ensure things

are going smoothly and to keep connections strong.

- Check in with your direct reports at least as frequently as they are checking in with their direct reports
- Set clear expectations for teachers who are developing learning plans. This might be provided in the school's learning continuity plan, but make sure that it is documented and clear somewhere as staff needs it to understand expectations and it will later be needed for state and accreditation compliance. Common places for clarification include: How long should lessons be? What is the target for number of hours students should spend in learning activities? How are teachers reporting in their plans, and how is the school tracking this time?
- Be clear in your expectations for staff members who have children at home. Are they expected to coordinate with spouses/partners or arrange for other childcare to the extent possible to ensure that the time they are engaged in video calls is child-free? Be clear in the challenges and opportunities here. Some schools have provided particular hour expectations (e.g., plan on working 30 hours a week during this time).
- Set clear expectations for non-exempt workers. How will timecards continue and how will work be assigned and completed?
- Set the expectation of professionalism while on video calls. Working from home and being on video still require a degree of professional surroundings, dress, and engagement. While being on video might resemble more of a "casual day" at school, if teachers and school staff would not dress, speak, or act a certain way in class on such a day, then they should not do so on video.
- Be clear that maintaining community and having fun are everyone's job. Ensure staff plan fun activities with students and staff as they go about their work and processes.
- Have supervisors set the tone for intentionally having "water cooler" or "hallway" moments. These are often part of the lifeblood of school community connections, and the team will now have to purposefully engage in those moments.

There will be many, many learning opportunities over the next few weeks (or months) as schools transition to virtual environments. As one experienced head said to me today, "First there will be excitement and euphoria, then there will be tension and exhaustion, and then — I hope — things will just seem ridiculously funny." While we may not have intended to take on this grand and chaotic experiment — and it may feel like we are crossing the Alps in a Fiat — we are on the journey together and there will be much to reflect on once we get to the other side.

Teleworking Policy and Agreement Samples

The following policies and sample are provided as examples only and should not be used as or in place of legal advice. Schools should work with their own attorneys when developing and implementing policies and agreements.

Teleworking Policy #1

SAIS transitioned to a virtual work environment in April 2016. All employees are required to maintain a safe and secure office space in their homes.

Reporting requirements are as follows:

- Each staff member should record all absences, vacation, travel, meetings, etc., on the shared SAIS calendar.
- Each staff member is required to update PTO every month on the spreadsheet provided at: Dropbox > SAIS > Staff Docs > 2019 Staff Docs > 2019 PTO Record
- Each staff member shall submit a periodic update of tasks and status to supervisor.
- Each staff member must complete an annual home office equipment inventory form.

The SAIS virtual work environment is not a substitute for child or elder care. Employees with dependents living at home are expected to make arrangements for dependent care as if they are working in an office environment, to allow for availability and concentration on work assignments. This does not mean that dependents must be absent from the residence during work hours.

Recognizing that effective communication is essential within a virtual workplace, all employees agree to be generally available for communication through company-approved communication avenues during typical working hours.

Communications

To ensure awareness of staff availability during the work day, enhanced use of Slack is encouraged. Using the status feature allows other staff to know your availability. The editing option of the status feature can indicate specific availability.

Teleworking Policy #2

Working at home is a privilege and may be authorized only by the head of school and the appropriate direct supervisor and will generally only be allowed in the event of a closing of the school's physical plant. Teleworking is not appropriate for every position.

While teleworking, employees are expected to conduct schoolwork, free from distraction, and be available to other school employees or community members during the regularly scheduled workday.

Because the flexibility of teleworking allows our staff more mobility and unlimited access/convenience to perform tasks (such as responding to emails and accessing desktop applications), the separation of work and personal time can seem ambiguous. Employees in non-exempt positions are prohibited from working outside of their standard work schedule and should refer to and adhere to work the school's regular schedule and overtime policies. Nonexempt employees must obtain prior approval from their supervisor for any alterations to the standard work schedule. All hours worked by nonexempt employee while working from home should still be recorded in the employee timesheet system, as required by the federal Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA). Please check with the business office if you are unsure about your position's FLSA classification for exemption status.

An employee who is authorized to telework is required to enter into a written Teleworking Agreement.

TELEWORKING AGREEMENT

This Agreement is entered into between _____ ("Employee") and the (" " or "School"), this ___ day of _____, 2020, and set forth the agreement between Employee and School regarding Employee's teleworking arrangement, as follows:

Remote Office

1. Employee shall be permitted to work remotely from home as needed for campus closing or other similar events. Employee agrees to provide a suitable workspace to be used primarily for purposes of Employee's work for School ("Remote Office").
2. The address for Employee's Remote Office shall be _____ . If Employee intends to move the location of the Remote Office, advance written approval must be obtained from School.
3. Employee represents that the Remote Office is safe, secure, and free from distraction. Employee agrees that he/she will maintain the Remote Office in a safe condition, free from hazards and other dangers to the Employee and equipment. Employee understands and agrees that School has the right to inspect Employee's Remote Office at any time during Employee's working hours on any scheduled workday.
4. Employee is prohibited from using the Remote Office for any meetings with employees, clients, members, vendors or any other person having a business relationship with the School.

Working Conditions

1. Employee is expected to manage dependent care or personal responsibilities in a way that enables Employee to successfully meet job responsibilities. Teleworking is not a substitute for child or other dependent care and Employee agrees that he/she will not provide child/dependent care during set work hours.

2. The schedule in which Employee shall telework from Employee's Remote Office shall be _____. Any changes to this schedule must be approved in advance, in writing, by _____.
3. Employee's supervisor and/or staff supervised by Employee must be informed by Employee of her/his schedule and whereabouts and must know how to contact Employee at all times during standard school hours. Employee must make his/her home or cell number(s) available to staff so Employee may be called directly if necessary.
4. Employee agrees to be at school for meetings or work that is more efficiently done on campus, despite being scheduled to telework on such days.

Office Supplies and Security

1. Employee agrees to bear all costs associated with the Remote Office including, without limitation, costs related to internet access, printer, office supplies (paper, pens, file folders, printer ink cartridges, etc.), and telephone. Any concerns with meeting this obligation should be addressed through the business office.
2. School will provide Employee with the following equipment:
_____ ("School Equipment"). The School Equipment shall be used solely for business purposes. All School Equipment, records and materials provided by the School shall remain the School's property. Use of the School's electronic communications systems (such as email and Internet) by Employee is subject to the School's general policies, including but not limited to the EEO policy. School is responsible for maintaining, repairing and replacing Equipment it provides. In the event of equipment malfunction, Employee must notify _____ immediately. *(Note: Some schools may have a separate agreement or set of policies that renders this clause and the next several relating to security unnecessary)*
3. Employee agrees he/she will implement good information security practices in the Remote Office. Employee agrees he/she is responsible for complying with the requirements set forth in the staff handbook.
4. Employee agrees to maintain the security and confidentiality of materials Employee accesses as part of his/her employment, and to abide by School's policies for employees regarding safekeeping of information. All information, either hard copy or on the computer, must be maintained in a confidential manner, such as in a password-protected file or in a locked cabinet.

General Employment Policies and Provisions

1. If Employee is non-exempt, he/she is not allowed to work more than eight hours in a day without prior specific written approval from his or her supervisor and must clock in and out when work begins and ends, and for breaks and meals in the same manner as if Employee were working on-site at the School
2. Employee agrees to immediately report any injury incurred while performing work for School, including injuries sustained in the Remote Office, just as an employee injured in the School's office would be required to do.
3. Employee understands that while teleworking, he/she is required to comply with the policies set forth in the School's employee handbook.
4. Employee understands and agrees that his/her employment is at-will and that this Agreement does not alter Employee's status as an at-will employee.
5. Employee's salary, benefits, and job responsibilities are not affected by this Agreement and the use of leave must be arranged according to current School policies and procedures.
6. This Agreement may be temporarily or permanently modified or discontinued at any time at the discretion of the president or Employee's supervisor.

I have read, understand, and agree to abide by the terms of this agreement.

Employee:

Date: