



WESTRIDGE SCHOOL

May 8, 2020

Dear Westridge Parents,

Thank you for participating in our remote learning survey as well as reaching out with questions, feedback, and support through emails and our town hall meetings. We are deeply committed to working to offer the best program possible – today and always. We value your perspectives especially in these new and fluid circumstances during which we lose some of the signals we receive in even the most fleeting interactions with students, and parents, across campus.

Here is a summary of parent and student survey responses:

- **Workload.** Students almost universally report their workloads are *right to too heavy*, while some parents are concerned that workloads are *too light* (most prevalent in the Lower School).
- **Live contact with teachers.** There is a significant gap in opinions on the level of time spent in live contact with teachers, with students overwhelmingly reporting time to be *right to too much* (only 2 grades reporting below 93% in this range) while more parents reported feeling live contact with teachers is *right to too light*. Despite the disparity between student and parent perceptions, a majority of parents reported that live contact with teachers is *right or heavy*.
- **Student collaboration.** Both students and parents report that collaboration among students for academics is *right to too light*.
- **Technology.** Students reported negative impacts of technology issues (e.g. connectivity and device issues) on learning significantly more often than parents.
- **What you would like to see more of** (themes were similar for students and parents):
 - Online social gatherings, student-led events, etc. (by far the most requested)
 - Advisory
 - Grade-level meetings, assemblies, Town Meetings, etc.
 - Group discussions and student collaboration in classes
 - More consistency in the schedule and in information/assignment postings
 - Arts
 - In addition to the broadly mentioned items above, a smaller subset of:
 - students requested a decrease in workload, time away from screens, and less time in class meetings so that time could be spent working
 - parents requested more synchronous classes and more 1-on-1 student/teacher check-ins

We also asked students two questions regarding their comfort/concern levels related to various academic and personal variables during the pandemic. Students across the grades

reported:

- Confidence in their ability to connect/communicate with their teachers and friends
- Confidence in their understanding of what is expected of them in classes
- Varying degrees of confidence in their schoolwork
- Trouble feeling motivated to complete their work (exceptions to this are grades 4 & 6)
- Feeling significant levels of concern with uncertainty around:
 - what school will look like in the fall
 - summer plans
 - when school will resume (unknown at the time of survey)

Feeling moderate levels of concern about illness of a family member or friends, and about being cut off from friends

PROGRAM ADJUSTMENTS

This feedback is being used to make adjustments this school year where practical and will also inform our planning over the summer, when we have a more judicious timeline for curriculum preparation for the potential of remote learning at some point in the fall or winter. Current program updates include:

- Schedules and pedagogy in grades four and five have shifted to address our youngest students' need for more structure to their day and more in-person guidance from teachers.
- Pedagogy in the lower and middle schools is shifting to include more small breakout groups and group projects.
- The Tell-A-Tiger tutoring and support program, in which Upper School students are available to assist Middle and Lower School students, has been established.
- Teachers in the Upper School, where classes have a wider variance in course structure and demands, have been asked to work with students to determine where and how they might increase student collaboration and class discussions. (For instance, earlier one Upper School English class decided that for them, live, synchronous discussion board conversations were preferred to live discussions via Teams video.)
- The Upper School will adopt weekly, full-group advisory meetings. (This already is the schedule in Middle School.)
- Each week, we are rolling out more student online gathering and activities from Middle School advisory dance parties and Greek & Roman Challenges to club meetings and year-end events including Senior Chalk Day, Petridge, and Upper School Town Meeting.

PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE

Though what the fall will bring remains uncertain and undoubtedly will for some time, we have already begun planning for multiple scenarios including the potential for at least one other period of remote learning. As part of our preparation, we will refine and enhance our remote program based on our own experiences these past months as well as that of the broader educational community. We believe firmly in the framework of blended learning (neither fully in-person nor fully online) we put in place in March. It is something we had thought through in our emergency planning over the years and is based on existing research and best practices in distance learning. We also turned to

thought leaders on learning during periods of stress and crisis, who recommend focusing on maintaining connection and engaging students in personally meaningful learning based more on developing skills than covering content.

Within this broader framework, however, we will grow and improve should we move off campus again. Our current curriculum was not purpose-built for remote learning but rather was translated for it virtually overnight amidst a crisis. And, as is the case for most teachers in the world, for many of our faculty members this was their first time teaching remotely. Despite these unexpected conditions, many positive things have happened in our school without walls. Much learning has occurred. Much emotional support has been offered. And based on learning from our successes and challenges over these months, and with months to prepare for a projected second wave, we will take Westridge remote learning to a new level.

A number of our administrators and faculty members have already been able to take part in webinars and symposia on remote learning best practices and are reporting back to their colleagues. More than a dozen will join programs next week and many more will be able to participate more fully in the summer. Professional development for educators engaged in remote learning is understandably a field that is exploding with knowledge gained during this worldwide health crisis and educational phenomenon. We are also meeting with peers from both local schools and those across the state, as well as health and safety consultants to share lessons learned and recommendations for different scenarios for the fall. I will say through my role on the board of the California Association of Independent Schools it has become particularly apparent that the educational community has the most to learn about how to serve our elementary school students who are only just learning to work independently.

Already, we are thinking about ways our schedule and the consistency of posting information and assignments for students could improve. We know that with time to plan, to test additional technologies and applications, and further our faculty professional development, we can better capitalize on the opportunities presented for meaningful student collaboration in remote learning. We can enhance connections between teachers and students while distanced. And we can definitely expand our school-sponsored online gatherings and student connection points.

Just as Westridge and our teachers are adjusting to this new style of learning, so are our students. Faculty have reported that over the past two weeks students have begun to better understand what would help them in this new style of learning and are getting better about asking teachers about it. And with time to prepare students for additional remote learning, among other things we will help them strengthen the skills needed, when class time is reduced, to take advantage of other opportunities to communicate with their teachers and collaborate with their classmates.

SYNCHRONOUS/ASYNCHRONOUS LEARNING

Before I conclude, I would like to specifically address the topic of synchronous learning. While our surveys and direct contacts with parents tell us that a majority of families find our current level of synchronous learning to be appropriate or too heavy, I know that some parents feel passionately that we should greatly increase live class time or replicate

our normal class schedule online. While I can understand this feeling, I want to make sure you know that we think this would have negative consequences for your daughters' education and health and wellness. We may not yet have the right mix, and certainly not across all grade levels or classes, but we are clear in the pedagogical foundation of our approach. We will continue to work to optimize our balance and hope you will continue to let us know the impact of the refinements we are making.

Thank you for staying with me through this long letter, but nothing is more important right now than efforts to provide the best possible education to your daughters during this crisis. None of us wish to be where we are today. From our position as educators and, for many of our faculty and staff, as parents of students undergoing remote learning, we understand your frustrations. We appreciate your honest feedback and willingness to have an open dialogue. You may not like every answer we have for you, but know that the hundreds of decisions we have made over the past two months have been made with the sole purpose of maintaining a top educational experience within current constraints. They are also made with an eye toward meeting the needs of widely diverse learners through consideration of what will work best for all and in the most equitable manner. To that end, I remind you to please reach out to your daughter's teachers if you find she is struggling or falling behind. Direct communication has never been as important as it is right now, and we are here for you.

I will close with appreciation for all you do to make Westridge a community, even now when that community is dispersed. In particular, during Teacher Appreciation Week, I thank you for your support of our faculty. I have been inspired by the hours and deep consideration they have put into helping our students survive and thrive during this time. Along with comments about program in the last, open-ended feedback section of our survey, so many of you – students and adults - took the time to celebrate and thank our teachers and acknowledge the vast number of variables, obstacles, and unknowns confronting them today. In case you didn't see it, I am sharing here [the link](#) to the beautiful tribute video the ASB leaders sent to all faculty and staff this week. While living through a disorienting experience, our students are revealing their character, their curiosity, their courage, and the goodness that people have associated with Westridge students for many, many years.

Thank you. Please stay well.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Elizabeth J. McGregor". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, elegant 'E' and 'M'.

Elizabeth J. McGregor
Head of School