

A School Year Unlike Any in History

On Saturday, March 7, 2020, thirty-nine HKIS Select Chorus students walked on the ice at the XL Center to sing the National Anthem to a filled stadium.

Little did they know that within one week, their classrooms, art rooms, playgrounds, libraries and cafeterias would be closed, and everything that had traditionally defined school would not exist for the next five months.

Connecticut's first Coronavirus (COVID-19) case was confirmed the next day.

Impact on Education: The COVID-19 Pandemic of 2020

Never before has our school district (or any school system in America) been as challenged to continue educating every student in an environment so different from the traditional classroom. What follows is a brief story of how our school district responded to the most unique disruption in its 47 year history.

While news and discussions about COVID-19 began much earlier than March 8, that date triggered the beginning of a new reality for RSD17. Dr. Holly Hageman - RSD17's School Superintendent - was in frequent contact with the state's Department of Education, RSD 17 Board of Education, Haddam and Killingworth's First Selectman, Departments of Health and Emergency Management, fellow Superintendents, Union heads, and parents.

Monitoring daily data became crucial as the State was expecting school districts to use their own judgement on whether or not to close. On Wednesday March 11, school districts in Fairfield County began closing.

As the potential severity of the virus became apparent, the guidance from the State Department of Education changed from "make a local decision" to "take a two week break or longer in education" to "an all out effort to facilitate Distance Learning for all students in their homes."

While the State Department of Education initially discouraged online teaching (because of concerns for consistency and equity) it became clear that this was a health crisis that was not going to be solved quickly. This 180 degree pivot left school districts across the state scrambling to respond appropriately to the changing guidance. "We were running two plans." HKIS Principal, Eric Larson explained, "That week I was simultaneously planning incoming fourth grade visits, state testing, and a cultural-diversity celebration, while also considering this might be the last week of classroom teaching."

As the situation and guidance unfolded, Dr. Hageman led RSD 17's administration team to launch a plan to keep students engaged in learning during a major disruption caused by a national pandemic. Teachers were instructed to identify on-line opportunities for continuous learning, bring their laptops home every evening in case a closure came with no warning, and to identify any students with home technology issues. The school district's website was updated with a web page for updates and guidance from the state. In addition, another page entitled *At Home Learning Connections* was launched and filled with

relevant, grade level instructional materials and activities for students to access to stay on top of the material and skills they were learning in the classroom.

On Friday, March 13th, LEARN region school districts, including RSD 17, simultaneously announced school buildings would close the following day for at least two weeks. Dr. Hageman and her team immediately informed staff and parents. Teachers encouraged students to take home textbooks, schoolwork, and library books that could be helpful during the closure; computers were lent out, and the Learning Connections web page went live.

Director of Food Services, Sharon Shettleworth, immediately applied to the State for a special exemption to remain open throughout the closure and provide breakfast and lunch for any child in town under the age of 18 who needed meals. Over the course of the next three months, Sharon and her staff provided 90-120 HK children with two meals a day, five days a week.

The following Monday, when the CT Commissioner of Education pivoted on previous guidance and encouraged districts to begin providing continuity of learning for students indefinitely, the administration immediately began to develop guidelines for teacher-directed online learning. Through that week and the months that followed, collaboration would be one of the most essential elements for success. Staff relied on connections with each other and educators throughout the state to design guidelines, collaborate on objectives, and share ideas and resources. “Phase One” of Distance Learning was underway.

Distance Learning – Phase One

RSD 17 had recently begun to use Google Classroom so that computer platform was familiar to educators and many students, but flipping classrooms from in-person to online required intensive training. Each school held ongoing virtual faculty meetings followed by small group meetings with coaches, library media specialists or tech team members to discuss where to begin, methods to deliver lessons and strategies to teach in this new way. Teachers set up classrooms through Google for each class they taught, and students were expected to check for their assignments each day.

On Monday, March 23rd, school was “back in session,” but it looked nothing like it had before. Principals recorded morning announcements and teachers posted daily assignments to their Google Classrooms by 9:00 a.m. every day. Students navigated classrooms not through hallways, but through websites and teacher’s recorded and live lessons. Working from home in a new world of education meant a challenge for everyone. Teachers were providing instructional assignments while learning new platforms, collaborating with each other and helping parents and students navigate this new domain.

Parents found themselves in the role of assisting their children, organizing, managing and navigating the platforms for younger students. Older students were better able to self-navigate. As it became apparent this teaching method would continue for longer than a few weeks, more computers were loaned out as families working from home at the same time realized they could no longer share computers throughout the household. The District ended up lending out 289 computers to HK families.

Distance Learning – Phase Two

By mid-April, RSD 17 had entered “Phase Two” of Distance Learning from online assignments to teacher-directed learning through increased live interactions and refined recorded lessons. Teachers scheduled daily or weekly video conferences for small groups or whole classes to meet and learn together. Connecting again with their friends and teachers helped students socially, emotionally, and cognitively. Curriculum Coordinator Heather Rigatti remembers, “During this time, educators worked hard to build community whether gathering for a morning meeting, having small group office hours, participating in the Principal's Google Classroom or connecting one-on-one for a counseling session.”

Throughout the fourteen weeks of Distance Learning, the well-being of all students was on everybody's mind. Starting the first day of closure, KES Principal Dennis Reed sent recordings of himself reading books to the students. HKMS Principal Dolores Bates and BES Principal Brienne Whidden wrote personalized postcards to each of their students. Principal Larson completed challenges sent in from his students from drawing a pug to performing trick basketball shots. Schools held “Spirit Weeks” encouraging students to dress to the theme and share pictures of themselves with their classes. Physically-distanced home visits from teachers included book drops in mailboxes, computer deliveries, and prize pizzas left on porches. Teachers orchestrated scavenger hunts through video conferences with candy prizes delivered to mailboxes. Younger students had the day off to participate in an at-home Field Day with their families. Food Services staff included special treats such as cookies, stickers, and frisbees in the meals they handed out. And teachers and students sent digital letters back and forth to each other through video compilations sharing pictures of themselves holding signs with positive messages. HKMS & HKIS staff even recorded a performance of the dance from *High School Musical's* “We're All In This Together” which was shared to students on the first day back from April vacation.

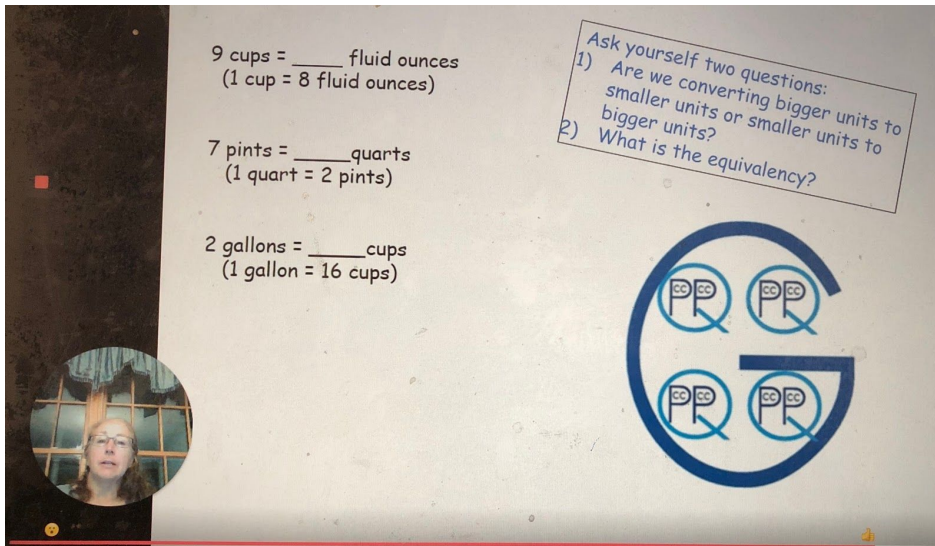
The school year ended on June 15th and schools found ways to celebrate the milestones together, if still apart, including Ringing Out ceremonies (virtually) and “Reverse Parades”. HKMS 8th graders were driven through a balloon arch to receive their promotion certificate as teachers in the parking lot cheered them on. And the HKHS Class of 2020 celebrated their Diploma Day unlike any in history, with a drive through ceremony. With teachers cheering, a DJ, and signs for each Senior lining the drive, the Seniors exited their cars dressed in their caps, gowns and HK facemasks, to cross the stage as their name was announced to receive their diploma and turn their tassel. Principal Hayward and her team worked with students to plan an in-person Graduation Ceremony, meeting all social distancing and group size parameters, on July 17th.

Suzanne Sack, RSD 17 Board of Education Chair, said “it was the talent and commitment of our entire staff and community that allowed us to provide learning opportunities for kids these last months. Without exception, everyone was pushed from their comfort zone and asked to do what they have never done before. We are so very grateful for everyone's efforts, patience and commitment to our community's children.”



Burr Elementary Third Grade teachers

and staff held virtual faculty meetings through Google Meets. Google Meets was used for video conferencing live classroom lessons and meetings, small group office hours and one-on-one check-ins between staff and students.



HKIS Teacher, Andree Pias, taught fifth-grade math with a program that showed her and the math lesson simultaneously. Various platforms were used by teachers to "screencast", which is a digital video recording of the computer screen and audio narration at the same time.



Becky Harkin's second grade BES classroom after packing up her students desks for the year. Teachers and Staff cleaned out desks and lockers for parents to pick up outside on assigned days and times.