

A letter from Shanghai:

From June 2020 to March 13, 2022, Shanghai American School (SAS) and other schools in Shanghai lived in a COVID-free bubble and were among the very few, if not the only ones in the world, to remain continuously open on campus for on-site learning. The one exception was a “typhoon day” last September that served as a test for our polished but very theoretical Distance Learning plan. I remember a feeling of shame at times during AAIE conversations, hearing about the travails of other school leaders in the world while we lived a life without masks, social distancing, nor disruptions to the regular schedule of events that make a school the beacon of a community.

On March 1, 2022, a few COVID cases of the Omicron variant originated in a quarantine hotel in Shanghai’s central Xuhui district. The city initiated its series of “dynamic zero-covid” targeted measures, geared toward achieving “dynamic clearance”: extended contact tracing, isolation of first and second contacts, large array of community testing, and targeted lockdown of some compounds defined as “medium-risk zones”. The impact on SAS remained low: a few students identified as second close contact were quarantined and missed school. So was a faculty member. A few others lived in a compound that closed for 48 hours and reopened once two series of PCR tests returned negative. Early on, we were mandated to initiate five successive testing events on one of our campuses for our entire student, faculty, and staff community. On March 13, just as we were discussing under which conditions the school would declare itself in Distance Learning, the Shanghai Education Bureau made the decision for us and mandated all schools in Shanghai to close for an indeterminate amount of time. The news came as a shock to a community accustomed to its exception status. Nonetheless, plans were in order and, after one preparation day for faculty, we started the successful implementation of our Distance Learning plan. After three weeks, various surveys and focus groups demonstrated a high degree of satisfaction in our student and parent population. End of story.

Or was it? Shanghai is geographically divided by the river Huang Pu. Districts east of the river are in Pudong (literally East of the Pu), districts west of the river are in Puxi (West of the Pu). SAS has a campus in each area. On March 28, the entire population of Pudong was put under a declared 4-day strict lockdown, with no right whatsoever to leave one’s apartment. Puxi was to initiate a similar lockdown on April 1st. When the Puxi lockdown started, the Pudong one continued, effectively placing the whole city under the harshest restrictions the world experienced since Wuhan in February 2020. On April 5, the closure was extended for an unspecified amount of time and is still going on as I write this, on April 24.

No one is allowed to leave their homes, 24/7, to the point where the most essential needs (food, water, medication) are not being met. People are submitted to an endless regimen of NAT and antigen testing. Living conditions vary tremendously within the community: expat teachers in school-owned or rented property in international compounds have been able to place group purchases and receive basic food supplies. Others face a dire situation and we had to rely on the support and solidarity of our parent community to pull strings, allowing care packages to be delivered. Our local teachers and support staff lose sleep not only for their own subsistence, but for that of extended family from which they were suddenly cut off. The school went from worrying about the balance between synchronous and asynchronous learning to finding out how to secure municipal licenses, so we may run five buses to deliver essentials to our 650 employees. While some among our faculty and staff had been eating potatoes and rice only for more than a week, others have struggled and at times failed to procure vital medication or receive adequate medical care. All of this in the extremely tense environment of a militarized lockdown. The anger surfacing as never before on nonetheless heavily censored social media platforms is turning into hunger riots in some of the larger compounds, where people at times fail to

receive any kind of government support. If tested positive, everyone is at risk to be sent to one of the mammoth quarantine centers, warehouses, and convention centers turned overnight into vast bedding areas with limited or no access to elementary hygiene. Videos circulating online generate a prominent fear among our faculty as number of cases rise and the probability of being detained and separated from loved ones increases. Yesterday, the government started placing wire fences, locks, and guards in front of buildings and compounds in the whole city. The fencing of entire sidewalks turns entire communities into bird cages that prevent anything or anyone to go in or out.

In this context, on Tuesday, April 12, the US consulate ordered its non-essential staff and all consulate families to depart. The following Friday, our Board of Trustees voted a motion that supports the administration's recommendation to declare Distance Learning until the end of the academic year, allowing us to plan for the best education possible in this very challenging context. This de facto allowed faculty and staff who desire to leave and teach from a distance to act and do so. A dozen teachers departed from China that week, with more to come. These faculty members will be required to fully support Distance Learning from abroad, on a Shanghai schedule. Anxiety runs high among those who plan to leave, as they fear that their neighborhood committee prevent them from departing their compounds or that the newly installed fences render it physically impossible.

The angst at play in Shanghai right now lies in the lack of predictability and control experienced by people in our community, as well as the absolute lack of visibility on any kind of resolution. The role of leadership in such times of crisis is to restore, within the parameters that are under our control, some degree of certainty and of choice. This is what we did by declaring Distance Learning until the end of the year. I am convinced this increased our chances to maintain sanity and a high-quality online education: teachers who leave will regain psychological and physical safety and be well-fed, which far outweighs the inconvenience of working on an odd schedule for the remaining six weeks of school. Those who stay are now doing it as a choice, allowing them to better own the situation, if not making it more acceptable or manageable.

Nonetheless, this news created anxiety in the parent community, especially a fear of teachers not being able nor willing to return after the summer. As is often the case, anger at the situation and the choices made by external bodies (the Shanghai government, or the College Board in the case of the stubborn refusal to offer an online option) gets misdirected at the school and its leadership. We will have to work hard to maintain and, at times, restore the fabric of a diverse community being one more time at risk of a split created by extraordinary circumstances.

Dr. Emmanuel Bonin

Deputy Head of School – Chief Academic Officer, Shanghai American School