



TOUGH LESSONS

Parents, kids were forced to suddenly adapt, struggle after the coronavirus hit.

BY MADDIE CONLEY

Two weeks off? Vacation!
The rest of the year off? Oh no.
This seemed to be the timeline of thoughts leading up to the predicament that students and parents found themselves in.

Originally, parents questioned what education at home would look like. Now, many are questioning their sanity.

Adults scrambled to figure out how to work online learning platforms and develop schedules for their children. Homeschool, cyber school and stay-at-home parents loomed over their shoulders taunting, “See, it’s not so easy, huh?”

The new normal has many students begging to go back to a place they formerly couldn’t wait to escape and has parents mentally mapping routes of escape from home.

It’s a battle between enjoying the quality time and enduring the quantity of time.

OVERWHELMED

Shakira Clark is a supervisor at the U.S. Army depot in New Cumberland. She’s supposed to oversee employees, but it’s been hard to focus with five children calling her all day.

Clark took off two weeks in April to stay home and help her kids with school. She suffered a pay cut, but knew she wouldn’t be effective at work when her head was at home.

“It was either I let my children fail or I make money,” she said. “I’m stuck between a rock and a hard place.”

Being a single mom is hard as it is, but, with having to balance work and homeschooling, it became hardly manageable. Then there’s the fact that her two oldest high school children have learning disabilities.

“Tenth grade is a pivotal moment,” she said. “I’m worried they’re going to be too far behind. I’m not equipped to even try to begin to teach them.”

Both of her high school students usually receive assistance in their classes, but the responsibility fell heavily on Clark. One of the students is enrolled in the Harrisburg school district and the other in Susquehanna. Clark said the Susquehanna case manager reaches out to help her child often, but the Harrisburg case manager does not.

The other kids are in seventh, fourth and first grades. Clark makes sure they are all up by 9 a.m. and work until the afternoon, but they all have varying, chaotic schedules.

“Trying to juggle the five of them is very overwhelming,” she said. “The different grade levels require my undivided attention.”

LEVEL THE FIELD

Stories like Clark’s are familiar to Ellen Hartman, head of school at St. Stephen’s Episcopal School in Harrisburg.

“St. Stephen’s is so diverse,” she said. “We had to think—how do we make sure we take care of families on each end of this spectrum?”

Hartman explained how some St. Stephen’s students are living in two-parent households and their needs are being met, while others live in single-parent households and rely on school lunches for food.

That was the first step for the school, making sure everyone was equipped to learn during the pandemic, whether that was through handing out devices or food.

“You have to figure out how to level the playing field,” Hartman said.

From there, the school built an online presence for students containing daily work and online class meetings and videos.

Still, Hartman realizes students have unique life situations that require a lot of catch-up work after schools (hopefully!) reopen in the fall.

“Teachers are giving quality education, but the context is so different,” she said. “Quality is dependent on that child’s context.”

Teachers regularly reach out to students virtually to maintain relationships. Guidance counselors and administrators have been available to students, as well.



Amber Luster and her son, Amauri.

With Hartman having a young child of her own who attends the school, she has been impressed with the teachers’ effort and intentionality.

“The silver lining is relationships,” she said. “I’ve seen how much the teachers mean to the kids and how much the kids mean to the teachers.”

COUNTING DOWN

Amber Luster is appreciative of her son Amauri’s teacher at Rutherford Elementary School. The teacher regularly Zoom calls with her third-graders.

Even with the teacher’s help, Luster is exhausted.

For weeks, Luster had to handle not only helping her son with his schoolwork but doing her own. Before summer break hit in May, she was finishing up a semester in college. She’s a senior at Messiah College in Mechanicsburg.

“I’m not working,” she said. “I had school, and I still have to cook and clean while helping Amauri. It’s hard.”

Rutherford was giving out devices to students in need of them, but, because Luster had a laptop, they didn’t qualify. The two had to figure out how to take turns using their one computer for homework.

Besides the challenges, Luster was glad her college moved work online for the rest of the school year because it gave her more time at home with her son.

“That’s the biggest plus, that I can spend more time with Amauri,” she said. “But I’m counting down the days until they’re done with school.”

Most parents and students agree. They’re ready for the year to end and hoping for a normal start in the fall. If anything, they won’t be taking it for granted for a while.

“You didn’t realize how much that community meant to you,” Hartman said.

For both parents and students, that may end up as the most widely shared lesson to come out of this strange semester spent at home. **B**

St. Stephen’s Episcopal School is located at 215 N. Front St., Harrisburg. For more information, visit www.sseschool.org.



EDUCATED GUESS

As back-to-school plans take shape, educators try to plot their way through the pandemic. | BY MADDIE CONLEY

When Gov. Tom Wolf ordered schools closed in March, nobody was ready. No educator had planned for something like this. Most didn't have the online resources readily available to teach remotely.

However, some schools switched gears faster than others. "We gave the students a three-day vacation and, by Thursday, we were up and running," said Phil Puleo, superintendent of the Christian School Association of Greater Harrisburg. "It was a Herculean effort by the teachers and parents."

After weeks of online schooling, students, parents and educators could finally let out a collective deep breath. They had made it to summer.

It's August now, but things remain unsettled. The pandemic is still with us, so people are back to holding their breath, wondering what the year is going to look like.

Some schools are returning to in-person classrooms, while others are sticking to online or testing a hybrid of the two. Many have pushed the fall start date back, and most have back-up plan upon back-up plan ready. All are trying to put their best foot forward in a future full of unknowns.

"We are really concerned about our kids' health," Puleo said. "But we also are really concerned about their education."

CLASS IN-SESSION

The Christian School Association of Greater Harrisburg (CSAGH), which includes Harrisburg Christian School and West Shore Christian Academy, plans to bring its students back to its brick-and-mortar buildings in the fall.

"We think we can do this in a reasonable and responsible way," Puleo said.

The two schools will open on time, on Aug. 18, with daily temperature checks, spaced-out desks, scheduled hand-washing times and regular cleaning.

Puleo explained that the learning environment will be flexible. "Window into the Classroom" is what CSAGH is calling its online instruction program. Students not ready to come back to school for health reasons, among others, can live-stream classes online.

"We are really trying to make sure everyone is comfortable going forward and that the education and community they are used to continues uninterrupted, whether they need to be on or off campus," Puleo said.

Harrisburg Academy, a private school in Wormleysburg, is taking a similar approach with in-person education and a virtual option. They too will require daily temperature checks, regular sanitation and social distancing. In addition, mask wearing by students will be mandatory.

"We adopted the stiffest rules we could, and I believe we have a safe environment," Head of School Adrian Allan said.

To Allan, school is more than academics. It includes social and physical elements, among others. That's why it was so important for him to bring students back.

"I look at this in terms of what's best for the whole child," he said. "If you're going to be a flagship premier school, you're going to have to go further than other schools."

But some schools are increasingly finding that not all families are comfortable going back.

While most schools are caught in the changing winds of the pandemic, cyber schools have remained firmly planted, already with a leg up on the situation. They may even be benefitting from the crisis.

"As school districts unveil plans for fall, we expect to see an uptick in enrollment," said Tim Eller, senior vice president of outreach and government relations at Commonwealth Charter Academy.

Already fully online, the public cyber charter school was largely unscathed by the coronavirus crisis, aside from moving their graduation ceremonies online. Everything else continued without a hitch, Eller said.

For this reason, he believes that cyber-school is the most stable option for students during the pandemic.

"Since everything is done virtually, there will be no disruption to CCA students," Eller said.

At the Pennsylvania Cyber Charter School, virtual education continued just like at CCA's, but, for CEO Brian Hayden, things were hardly normal.

"While our students didn't change the place they went to school, their family life changed significantly," Hayden said.

He acknowledged that, for many students, internet access created an issue with multiple family members at home needing access at the same time. In addition, much of the PA Cyber staff consists of parents with young children whose daycares were closed. It was a challenge just to make sure they were able to teach, Hayden said.

"From the teaching perspective, we learned what worked and didn't work," he said.

Moving forward, PA Cyber is already seeing higher enrollment inquiries than last year. Whereas these inquiries don't typically come in until late July, the school was witnessing an uptick as early as June.

"I think cyber-school is a great option for those who choose it," Hayden said.

GETTING CREATIVE

Capital Area School for the Arts (CASA) has been working on their classroom expansion project to add more room for STEAM and other courses on the third floor of Strawberry Square.

The plan is for the project to be completed by the start of the new school year. This is perfect timing, as it will give students more space to spread out when they return, said Tim Wendling, CEO and principal of CASA.

"Even though there's so much going on, we are really excited to have our brand new space," he said.

The public charter school plans to conduct a hybrid model of learning that incorporates rotating days of in-person and virtual classes starting Aug. 31. They have alternate plans prepared in case they decide to move to all in-person or go fully online.

"As we plan, we are being realistic," Wendling said. "Our main goals are to provide the best instruction and make sure all are safe. With this, everything is unknown, so we are trying not to worry."

The Harrisburg School District has been trying to do the same. But many of its families are hesitant about sending their students back.

Chief Academic Officer Susan Sneath said that many parents reached out to the district, saying they didn't want to send their kids back to a brick-and-mortar school.

In response to that, the district created their Harrisburg Virtual Learning Academy (HVLA), which will provide district students with a free cyber option for learning.

"I wouldn't be in public education if I didn't think brick-and-mortar was the very best way to educate kids," Sneath said. "However, my hope and dream for HVLA is that parents in Harrisburg feel that their school district is supporting what they want."

HVLA is for district students K-12. They will be able to participate in district sports, clubs and events and will graduate as a Harrisburg Cougar.

As far as the district's plans go for its traditional students, they weren't finalized as of this writing. An update made in July by Superintendent Chris Celmer suggests there may be a mixture of online and in-person learning. Desks will be spaced six feet apart and, in compliance with the order made by PA Secretary of Health Rachel Levine, masks will be worn inside the buildings. The school is also considering a new bell schedule to reduce the flow of traffic, according to a statement made by Celmer.

The district's start date has been pushed back to Aug. 31.

Plans for the upcoming school year are fluid and changing, along with the times. Every school, every district and every family is doing its best to balance education and safety. It really is a learning curve.

"It's going to take a lot for us to get used to," Puleo said. "It's scary, it's unknown, but as a caring community, we are providing for the academic, social and health safety of our students." **B**



SCHOOL'S OUT

The century-old William Penn High has long sat vacant. Will it ever turn the page?

BY MADDIE CONLEY



Capital Rebirth team at the William Penn High School

Mae Sobczak was a relatively quiet student back in her high school days at William Penn High School. She had lots of friends and participated in the orchestra, her high school's sorority and intramural sports after school. But she wouldn't have labeled herself "Miss School Spirit."

Sixty-four years later, however, things are different.

After graduation, Sobczak started organizing class reunions. Every five years, William Penn alumni get together, and, each six months, the class of '56 catches up. On top of that, Sobczak and a group of women meet for lunch every Friday to reminisce on the old days and chat about the new.

In 2006, the class celebrated its 50th reunion. Sobczak, along with a committee, organized the event, which included a tour of the old William Penn building. The group went there excited to relive old memories, but left feeling like the building they toured was nothing like their beloved alma mater.

"When we came out to get on our bus, we were saying how it was so sad," Sobczak said.

Over a decade later, it's even sadder, as William Penn has sat, deteriorating, since. The classrooms, once full of students, are full of old rubble and garbage, and the halls display crude graffiti. Do a quick Google search of the old school, and you'll find videos posted by thrill seekers, trespassers on the hunt for ghosts or just curious residents.

Over the years, many fires have been set in the building, requiring the Harrisburg Bureau of Fire's attention.

"Structurally, that building is in phenomenal shape," Fire Chief Brian Enterline said. "It's more that the contents inside are burning, not the building itself. The problem is it's a large, vacant school building. It's very difficult to secure."

All the while, William Penn has sat in the hands of the Harrisburg school district—too damaged to hold on to, too big and costly to give up easily.

People have wondered what will come of the grand old campus overlooking Italian Lake, the school that was once Harrisburg's pride.

IN THE DAY

It's the early 1920s in Harrisburg. The city isn't just growing; it's thriving. Suburbanization hasn't led to flight out of the city yet. There's even a trolley car system. But one of the hottest topics in the city is education. People are looking for modern, quality schools.

David Morrison, president of Historic Harrisburg Association, paints the picture.

People were ready to send their kids to school in the city, but the city wasn't ready for them, he said. Many city schools were built in the post-Civil War years—the 1870s and 1880s. Once the 1920s came roaring around, the school district needed to play catch up.

"By the '20s, the educational infrastructure of Harrisburg was pretty obsolete," Morrison said.

In the early 1900s, Harrisburg Technical High School, located in the building now known as Old City Hall, was built on Walnut Street and served students for many years. But with people hungry for top-notch education, Harrisburg Tech became

a government center and a new, larger high school was proposed.

"In those days, the public school systems were so advanced," Morrison said. "In some cases, people who lived in the suburbs paid to have their children attend Harrisburg schools."

Urban architect Charles Howard Lloyd, who would later claim fame for the Zembo Shrine, was busy designing schools. Harrisburg Tech and Simon Cameron School (1896) were formed in his signature gothic style. It was only fitting that the district called upon him for the new school they would call Hoffman's Woods School (later William Penn), Morrison explained.

But Allison Hill families wanted a school of their own that their kids could walk to. So, the district decided on two separate schools—John Harris and William Penn.

William Penn building plans were scaled back to save funds for the second school on the Hill, but the new blueprints were hardly modest.

"They had huge halls," local historian and William Penn alum Calobe Jackson recalled. "We would start track right after Christmas, and we would run through the halls for practice."

Jackson graduated from the class of 1948. He remembers an indoor courtyard and a grandiose auditorium with a balcony. It was beautiful and well designed, he said.

In addition, there was a kitchen, cafeteria, housekeeping suite, science and lab rooms and shop spaces for tech courses, amongst other classrooms, according to "Building Harrisburg," a book by historian Ken Frew.

"Years ago, they used to say William Penn was the largest high school campus in the U.S.," Jackson said. "It was really a beautiful school."

Jackson's class had a little over 300 students, while the full school had about 1,200. Back then, high school lasted three years instead of four.

When William Penn was constructed in 1926, high school enrollment was swelling. Between 1900 and 1920, student enrollment in the United States quadrupled and then nearly quadrupled again by 1940, according to the public policy magazine, *City Journal*. But it was in that same decade that the school movement ended. *City Journal* ties that to segregation and racial discrimination, which had Blacks enrolling at lower numbers than whites.

By the mid-1950s, enrollment at William Penn had only declined slightly. Sobczak remembers that her class of '56 had about 264 students. Pride for their school was still strong among students, she recalls.

"We were proud to be city school graduates," she said.

But the 1950s represented the high mark for William Penn. That decade, the city's industrial companies began closing, and people started leaving Harrisburg for the suburbs. In 1972, John Harris absorbed William Penn students, the building morphing into a technical school before closing entirely.

MOVING FORWARD

For most William Penn graduates, it's been a long time since they danced at a sock hop or scored a goal in intramural sports. Most are parents, grandparents

and even great-grandparents. Many have passed away. Sobczak's alumni mailing list gets shorter by the year.

Just like many of the students that once walked its halls, William Penn is old. But that doesn't mean it's any less grand. The interior may be decrepit, but the building is still the columned mammoth that it was in the 1920s.

For some, that's enough to see it ripe with potential.

Superintendent Chris Celmer said the school district is currently taking letters of interest and offers for the William Penn building.

"We want them to have local interest in the community, and they're going to have to have experience," he said. "It has to come with the ability to finance."

Local nonprofit Capital Rebirth put in a \$2.5 million bid in March and garnered over 7,500 signatures from the community on a petition of support for the plan they're calling "The Rebirth Project." The group wants to create a community center, including space for education, entertainment and wellness, explained founder Mikell Simpson.

"William Penn has always been a historic landmark," he said. "We know what the needs of the community are and how everyone can benefit."

Included in the building would be an indoor stadium, classrooms, an enclosed track and offices. Simpson estimates that the work would take three to four years and cost up to \$175 million.

But others envision the building as something else entirely.

Jackson could see it as a retirement home with outdoor space for rehabilitation services. Morrison thought turning it into condos or apartments would be nice or even having it join forces with Zembo Shrine across the street for a national organization.

"It has the possibility to really enhance that whole part of Uptown Harrisburg if it's done right, and that's why we care," he said.

There have been other successful school building conversion projects in the city, such as the old Simon Cameron School in Olde Uptown and the former Boas Street School at Green and Forster streets, which both are now apartment buildings.

At the beginning of the year, the redevelopment group, The Bridge, started renting the old Bishop McDevitt school with plans to build an eco-friendly community center. It also has put in a bid for William Penn, according to the developers.

So, builders have big plans for other big school properties in the city.

But William Penn isn't just big—it's enormous—including a 222,000-square-foot building and 25 surrounding acres of land.

As Superintendent Celmer said, taking on a project like this requires not only a heart for the community, but strong resources backing it.

The district, he said, continues to weigh all viable offers. **B**

The William Penn building is located on the 2000-block of N. 4th St., Harrisburg.

For more information on The Rebirth Project, visit their Facebook page. To learn more about The Bridge, visit www.thebridgeecovillage.com.



Mayah Hodges

VIRTUALLY ACCEPTABLE

Online learning gets mixed grades from Harrisburg students, families.

BY MADDIE
CONLEY GITTENS

Nazier Taylor was always goofing off in school, self-admittedly. He liked to “mess with” his friends and teachers. As a teenaged boy, he enjoys having a little fun. Nonetheless, he did well in his classes, he said.

When the Harrisburg School District made the switch to online learning, Nazier was happy. He got to stay home and sleep a little later. But it didn't take long before things started going downhill.

“I always did good in school,” he said. “I hate computers now.”

At home, Nazier couldn't focus. He would fall asleep, he said, unless he was looking at his phone. One of the biggest challenges for him was that he couldn't keep up with his teachers. They went too fast, he said, and his mom was unable to help him.

“I was going to fail,” Nazier said.

It was his first year in high school, and he was lost.

The experience with online education has been vastly different from student to student and family to family in the school district. A few are doing well in their new environment, while others are struggling.

In August, the district decided on a 100% virtual start to the academic year. Students could either attend the new Harrisburg Virtual Learning Academy (HVLA) and commit to online learning long-term or follow the “Pathway to Classroom Instruction,” with the hope of eventually returning to brick-and-mortar learning. Acting Superintendent Chris Celmer said that about 285 students enrolled in HVLA.

However, the options aren't looking too different today, as benchmarks that the district set in order to bring students back to the classroom haven't been met.

In order to re-open, the district requires a three-week period of sustained COVID-19 positivity rates from 3 to 4% and incidence rates per 100,000 people below a rate of 50 in Dauphin County. There also must be a decrease in community spread of the virus.

As of this writing, these benchmarks haven't been met. In fact, pandemic trends have been growing steadily worse since September.

"I don't know when kids will be back," Chief Academic Officer Susan Sneath said. "We are trying to make the most of the situation. Nobody knows the exact right thing to do here."

It's a complex and difficult decision that all school districts have had to make—in-person or online? But every student seems to experience the situation a little differently.

A CHALLENGE

During the pandemic, Nicole Smith, a fourth-grade teacher at Scott Elementary School, has been adjusting to online instruction. It has taken innovation, she said, coming up with songs and activities to engage students through a computer screen.

But it's still not easy.

Smith has called on students before to answer a question, only to see their screen freeze mid-response.

"How much is that kid receiving from me, if it's not working on their end?" Smith wondered.

She explained that one of the biggest issues with online schooling in Harrisburg is internet access. Many families, she said, have multiple students sharing a Wi-Fi router, slowing down the system.

When students were in school, the district had an average of one device for every five students. Now, each student needs their own device. Additionally, the district developed a program to provide free internet to students. Even with these extra measures, the district is at about 87% average daily attendance.

"We have to assume that's 87% with secure internet," Sneath said. "It's a challenge."

To access the internet and electricity, families like the Hodges have had to pay.

"The kids are home all day, every day," said Angela Hodges, a mother of two Harrisburg students. "We are paying twice the amount we would normally pay for utility costs."

Angela and her husband Maurice said that the extra expenses have been difficult to bear. However, they are happy to have their kids home and appreciate the district's attempt to keep them safe.

Smith said that other barriers to effective learning are the responsibilities and distractions that many students have at home. She recalled a student who had to hold her little sibling on her lap during a class session.

"You have to be understanding of those types of circumstances," she said.

For Nazier, getting out of his house and having a quiet place to do work has been a lifesaver.

Every Thursday night, he goes to Center for Champions, a mentorship program in Allison Hill. When the staff found out Nazier was struggling with school, they offered a desk in their office for him to work during his classes from 8:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. They hope to be able to do that for more students.

Ever since, Nazier has been doing better.

SUPPORT SYSTEM

Phylicia Carter's son Josiah struggled in his special education classes in the school district. He was behind where he should've been academically for his grade level. When the district decided to go online, Carter moved Josiah to Commonwealth Charter Academy.

While still holding her full-time job, Carter has had to help her son catch up to the sixth-grade level he is in.

"The adjustment is very difficult," she said. "I feel like I'm in class because they are asking me to do so much. But I'm glad I made the decision I made."

According to Celmer, about 187 students moved to charter schools between March 13 and Aug. 31, due to the pandemic. He said that the district will be reaching out to those students to encourage them to return. Harrisburg's virtual platform is expanding, and Celmer thinks students will want to come back.

Some students that stuck with the district are doing well in the virtual world.

Siblings Maurice Jr. and Mayah Hodges said that their grades have improved while learning online.

It was a hard adjustment at first, especially for Mayah who missed her friends. But, overall, they've had a positive experience and have felt supported by their teachers.

Sneath said that, for most students, grades have stayed relatively stable. She hasn't seen an "overabundance of failures" or numbers that look much different from last year.

Smith said that the virtual platform has actually allowed her to connect better one-on-one with her fourth-grade students.

She said that students can privately message their teacher if they have a question, and a teacher can do the same if a student isn't engaged with the lesson.

Although Nazier still hates going to school on a computer, he said that his teachers have been helpful.

"School is never going to be the same again after this," Sneath said. "So, when students do come back, how can we keep the good parts from this?" **B**

For more information on the Harrisburg School District, visit hbgds.k12.pa.us.

To learn more about Center for Champions or to volunteer, visit centerforchampions.org.



Nazier Taylor



Maurice Hodges Jr.