



Bonnie Iversen

Transitioning to Online School During THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

San Gabriel Academy Educators Share Recommendations for Good Practice

Planning for any school year is a challenge, but planning for a pandemic year was not on the minds of the administration and faculty at San Gabriel Academy (SGA) in San Gabriel, California, U.S.A. Christian educators in particular have an enormous responsibility, not only to provide quality education, but also to point their students to Christ in all situations. The call to “Feed my lambs” is extended to all who profess to love Jesus Christ (John 21:15-17).¹ During a pandemic, the challenge of “feeding Christ’s lambs” at a time in which schools are closed requires creativity and innovation based on clear curricular goals. The question is: “How can we be most effective in continuing to provide the highest quality of Christ-centered education possible through distance learning?” Over the next several months, SGA, along with many other Adventist schools, would continue to evolve in its understanding of how to feed Christ’s sheep during this pandemic.

In the past 10 weeks, as of the writing of this article, many parents have commented on the seemingly seamless transition from in-person to distance learning in just two days.

However, the fact is that the platform for this transition began three years prior to the emergence of COVID-19. At that time, SGA began transitioning to a Standards-based Referenced (SBR) curriculum. Working with Marie Alcock,² the faculty began organizing, aligning, and articulating their curriculum to ensure that students had clearly defined goals and objectives. A key component to SBR is the prioritization of standards. Prioritized standards are the fundamental learning goals students need to master.

In addition, SGA began looking at how technology might be best utilized as a tool across the curriculum and not just in a technology class. Teachers had been using tech platforms that support, enhance, and organize learning. The implementation of the SBR system, with its prioritized standards, guaranteed that teachers and students knew exactly what was essential for learning, and the integration of technology ensured an organized delivery system. This set the stage not only for a smooth transition, but also ensured there would be minimal gaps in learning despite the disruption to the program.

Another blessing came in the form of anticipating the possible need to move to a distance-learning model.

God is always directing His people in the best path they should follow. Officially, in-person classes ended on March 19, but school administration had been meeting since late January to discuss the probability of transitioning to distance learning before the end of the school year. Faculty meetings in February dedicated time to discussing the possible upcoming change and encouraging teachers to prepare for this new learning paradigm. These sessions provided participants with an opportunity to identify appropriate computer applications, share possible teaching strategies, and encourage colleagues through this uncharted territory. Faculty meetings in March offered springboards for teachers to make final refinements and adjustments to their distance-learning plans.

Clearly, it would be impossible to plan for every detail of what would come. Since no manual on navigating a classroom through a pandemic exists, prayerful preparation continued, and adjustments were continually implemented. Different grades and age levels would require different levels of support. Younger students would need help logging on to classes and finding resources for the first several uses. After a while, they would become experts and not require parental assistance.

No matter how well distance learning is executed, certain aspects of an in-person class can never be replaced. There is a beauty in the connection that occurs when engaging with students in person. While this fact may seem obvious, it became even more poignant under the recent conditions. Participating in a mission trip and music tour, making memo-

ries at the end-of-year beach vespers, playing a game of basketball with students, enjoying lunch outdoors together on a beautiful spring day, and praying with students are some of the aspects of Adventist schools that make the denomination's system unique. These types of interactions cannot be replaced but can be addressed in this engagement vacuum through Zoom or other platforms.³

SGA teachers began to use the Zoom app to meet with students in real time. Class schedules were modified for the lower grades to reduce screen time for younger students. At the high school level, class schedules remained the same. Attendance was almost perfect that first day (March 23) and has continued so since. If any student lags in checking in to class, the parent receives a call from the front office, and more often than not, the tardy student quickly appears on screen. This is the routine followed at the start of every class period, everyday.

To ensure classroom engagement, students are required to keep their cameras on and show their faces. The curriculum did not change, and students readily adapted to their new locations. All classes meet virtually, including chorale, orchestra, art, and physical education.

The final step was to ensure that the parents' needs were also met. Parental participation and support are essential in the successful transition and implementation of distance learning. Some parents were still working and could not be with students to either support them with technical issues or to encourage them to be present in class during scheduled times. A stressed-out parent equals a stressed-out student. Helping to mitigate parental stress is critical to preserving a positive school image and influencing students' perceptions of the program.

Unknown territory has a way of producing challenges, often unanticipated, for which solutions must be created. SGA's administration and faculty faced a number of those challenges and creatively designed solutions.

Challenges and Solutions

One challenge experienced by every teacher was finding assessment instruments that could replace in-person tests. Peter Chung,⁴ SGA's history teacher, integrated the College Board model of open-book testing. This type of assessment has an application base with a time limit that still requires students to prepare and study for the exam in order to do well. Today's

generation of young people are visually focused, Chung says, and social media occupies a large portion of their time. Because he has always taught history with the daily use of PowerPoint, complete with visuals and embedded videos, he believes his transition to distance learning was accomplished more easily. He approaches each class as a YouTuber would, studying how various people



Chorale meets with Director Sheen Sanchez to practice their music.



Anna Aitken, 1st-grade teacher, holds a parent/teacher conference through Zoom.



Junior high religion and history teacher Sean Lehnhoff shares a Bible video with his students.

make their presentations, and then integrating some of those styles into his presentations.

Michele Choi, an English teacher at SGA, agrees that distance learning has forced her to pursue creative options for classroom instruction. “Fortunately,” she says, “I have been able to learn about different strategies from my tech-savvy colleagues. I would recommend providing chunks of time for different activities in order to break up the monotony of class time.” It can be difficult for students to listen to a lecture while staring at a screen, so using informational videos that incorporate a variety of images and sounds brings positive results. Choi encourages teachers to experiment with the multitude of resources available to find online tools that fit well for them and for their students.

Teaching technology to students

who are using such a wide variety of devices adds complexity and can be difficult. The devices available to each student at home differ significantly. They include smartphones, iPads, and desktop computers, some PCs, others Apple products. Not all computer apps work well with all devices, and discovering which ones work better with specific devices was a challenge that needed to be quickly solved by the head of SGA’s technology department, Faith Yeaton. Her advice is, “Don’t get upset if some great intended plan doesn’t work. Just keep trying until you find the desired connection.”

Students are eager to share what they know, including their screens at certain times, and they are more than willing to help one another. “Let the students do some of the teaching,” suggests Yeaton. Her students are discovering how to work with various technologies to make presentations in

their virtual classroom. They are also creating media that can be viewed during video conferencing.

Teaching music is primarily performance based. Performing in sync within the environment of distance learning can be difficult to impossible, due to varying bandwidth capabilities. This problem has allowed Sheen Sanchez, SGA’s choral music instructor, and Melvir Ausente, orchestra director, to adjust their teaching to focus more on the standards that each student is required to meet. Sanchez explains, “In music, our primary standards include creating, performing, responding, and connecting. Students had already learned and performed substantial amounts of music during the previous three quarters of the school year.”

In both music realms, this period of quarantine has been devoted to the prioritized standards that have not yet been met. During in-person performance-based classes, more time is spent learning a repertoire for scheduled performances, resulting in a minimization of other aspects of the curriculum. Learning from home has provided the time to focus more on music literacy—music theory, sight-reading, dictation, and score analysis.

Physical education presents other unique distance-learning hurdles. Students no longer have access to the conventional equipment in the gymnasium and weight room. Kevin McCloskey, SGA’s athletic director, explains that he and Mario Negrete, another physical-education teacher, have had to utilize skill development and bodyweight fitness activities that require household items, such as chairs, books, and exercise mats, rather than high-tech sports and conditioning equipment. Physical-education teachers have also been instructing their students using the MyFitnessPal app to log and record caloric input (diet), caloric output (exercise), and the BodySpace app to

build custom individualized workout routines using only space and equipment that are available at students' homes. Coach McCloskey has also found it beneficial to have his students lead the activities. He often places a student in charge of each portion of fitness and of each part of a skill,⁵ resulting in a higher degree of interaction. This physical-education forum has enhanced students' desire to participate in class and gives each student an opportunity to lead.

Approaching distance learning on the elementary level presents issues different than those faced in dealing with high school students. One primary obstacle in the lower grades is limiting students' required screen time. Research has shown that there is damage to cognitive functions with excessive screen usage.⁶ Thom Harder, SGA's Grade 5 teacher, suggests that, "In order to minimize and prevent the negative impact inherent in too much computer time, teachers of grades TK (transitional kindergarten)-8 maximize the use of hands-on activities for their students at home." Another solution to this challenge has been to construct assignments that students can work on away from the screen and have them to come back later to present the completed project to the class.

"Even before determining how students would log into their classes and navigate our digital platforms, I needed to find a way to find a balance between structure and flexibility for the sake of my young TK and kindergarten students and their families," states Rose Gorospe, TK-K teacher. COVID-19 has had a significant effect on households with multiple children who are sharing devices or working around the schedules of working parents or caregivers whose first language is one other than English. "What has helped me tremendously as a kindergarten teacher," Gorospe continues, "is to record videos of myself explaining topics and then post them for parents to refer to when they are working on a

particular subject with their child."

Young children are better able to stay engaged when movement is integrated into learning. "The general rule of thumb for those little eyes," Gorospe states, "was to have live screen sessions no longer than a full-length movie and plenty of movement breaks in between." These breaks require students to stand up, look away from their screens, and complete certain assigned tasks, such as going on a scavenger hunt around the house, drinking two glasses of water, or mimicking their favorite ani-

mal as they walk to the front door and back.

Teachers in the mid-pandemic virtual classroom must realize that parents of students of all ages are having to create their own "new normal" schedule at home. That presents a very different picture for each family, especially those with younger students. One household may rise and shine at 8:30 a.m. and are able to have their children fed and ready to learn. Others may take advantage of a few extra hours of sleep. Still others may need to help their students after



Liam Guadiz checks in with his 4th-grade class with a "thumbs up."



Sophomore Luis Jabla takes a break from his Computer Applications class.

a full day of work. The flexibility of a video that is accessible at the parents' discretion has proven helpful during this time. It gives a certain amount of control back to families who have lost control of so many things already, such as job security, the ability to shop for basic needs, or simply going out with friends.

SGA's faculty is learning and implementing new information in a way that is making them even better teachers. Although the challenges are great, and it may be too early to accurately assess the success of virtual classrooms, there are many positive indicators that students are receiving a quality education. They have shown more confidence and willingness to share their thoughts in a discussion during online classes, perhaps because they have the advantage of being shielded by a computer screen in the comfort and security of their own homes.

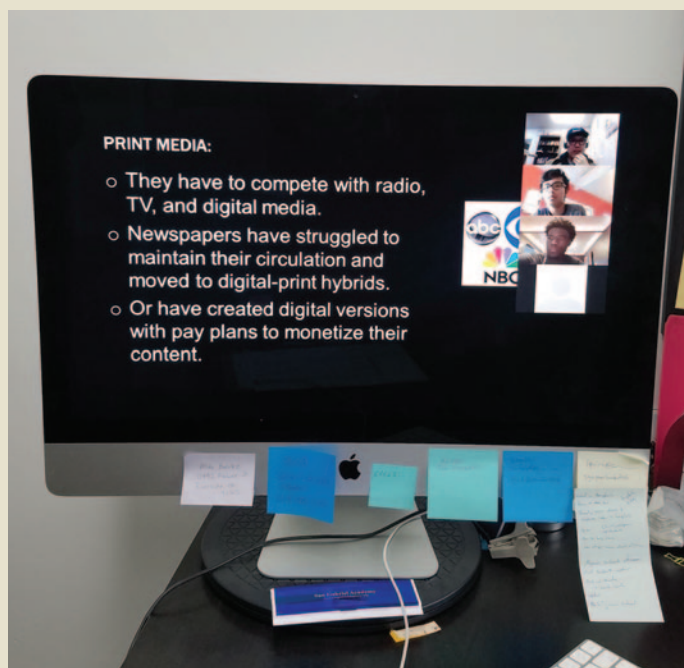
"One of my most rewarding moments," says history and Bible teacher Rychelle Lehnhoff, "was watching my students present a World War II history project on Zoom. As an extra challenge, I gave them the quest to research personal stories of individuals from the war. I shared about my grandfather and encouraged them to look into their own history and heritage." Many of her students thus learned about their own family history as they took time while at home to call their grandparents and ask them about their experiences. Others read a biography and learned about someone who intrigued them. Lehnhoff's students created stories, podcasts, videos, and paintings. Then they shared with their classmates on Zoom what they had discovered. "I was unsure how a project like this would go when the students were developing these things for online presentation without me being there to check in on their

progress. I was so impressed by all they did and actually got the most participation from any challenge I've given the students this year." They were excited about what they had learned.

The Takeaway

The feedback from parents has been positive and supportive. One high school parent said, "As a parent of two children enrolled at SGA, I can say unequivocally that this program has just as much depth and direct instruction as before, and it drives real learning. I'm very proud of what SGA has been able to accomplish in these difficult times." Another said, "SGA has put student learning first. Rather than using e-mail as the primary means of communicating assignments and lessons, our teachers are helping students learn, answering their questions, and creating real-time virtual classrooms and collaboration." An elementary parent expressed relief that her children were excited to log in to their virtual classrooms and to interact with their classmates and teachers.

Teachers miss seeing their students



Peter Chung conducts his Advanced Placement U.S. History class.

in person. They miss interacting with them and chatting with them on breaks. The students have shared those same sentiments. SGA continues to plan for the most special graduation weekend possible for the Class of 2020. SGA's teachers personally delivered lawn signs to every graduate in honor of each one's accomplishments. The students were enthusiastic and told those who delivered them how much they missed school and all the teachers. Yet, they have remained determined and resilient as they contemplate the next step in their educational journey.

Despite the challenges, essential elements such as beginning classes with prayer, talking with students about how they are navigating the pandemic, and providing opportunities for students to share God's leading in their own lives and that of their families, are all still possible online, and are regularly incorporated throughout the class period. On the second day of distance learning, Kristi Huynh asked her 4th-grade students to share how they felt by giving

a thumbs up, thumbs sideways, or thumbs down. One student gave a thumbs up, and Huynh asked why. “My day is going well because I get to see all of you guys,” came the reply. “It was a simple answer, but it spoke volumes,” Huynh said.

Human interaction is at the core of education, which is all about relationships. For the Christian educator, this interaction is essential, since it is the teacher who will often be the person who leads students to the feet of Jesus. The essence of what we have learned from this experiment is that regardless of whether we are conducting in-person or distance-learning school, the teacher makes a difference. He or she plans for the instruction to be engaging and meaningful and sets the culture of the classroom. In addition to developing creative and innovative curricular adaptations designed to maintain meaningful connections with students, Christian educators must also maintain their own personal connection to the Shepherd, Jesus Christ, especially during this socially distanced time. ✍

This article has been peer reviewed.

Bonnie Iversen, BA, has served for the past six years as Director of Advancement at San Gabriel Academy, a TK-12 educational facility in southern California, U.S.A. She received her Bachelor of Arts degree in English at Southern Adventist University in Collegedale, Tennessee, and has completed postgraduate studies at Louisiana State University and Southwestern Law School. Prior to joining SGA's administrative team, she was Chair of the Department of History at SGA for 20 years.

Recommended citation:

Bonnie Iversen, “Transitioning to Online School During the COVID-19 Pandemic: San Gabriel Academy Educators Share Recommendations for Good Practice,” *The Journal of Adventist Education* 82:2 (April-June 2020): 42-47.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. John 21:15-17. *New International Version* (NIV) Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV® Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.
2. Dr. Marie Alcock is President of Learning Systems Associates (LSA), an education consulting agency. She serves as an education consultant, and in collaboration with the American Education Research Association (AERA), People to People, and the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD), she has worked nationally and internationally to effect educational change. For more information see: <https://www.lslearning.com/about/>.
3. Protecting students engaged in the online environment requires careful planning. For more on this topic see “Protecting Student Privacy: Learning From COVID-19” by Annette Melgosa and Ernest Staats on page 9 of this issue.
4. Names in this article are used with permission.
5. Student safety is of utmost concern and plans should be in place to ensure that safety measures, supervision guidelines, and instructions on how to prevent sports/physical education are clearly conveyed to students and parents.
6. Victoria L. Dunckley, “Gray Matters: Too Much Screen Time Damages the Brain,” *Psychology Today* (2014): <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/mental-wealth/201402/gray-matters-too-much-screen-time-damages-the-brain>.

Editorial *Continued from page 3*

within two years' time, we have received all sorts of interpretations. This is only normal and expected from diverse populations with access to extensive information and with a great deal of extra time. The problem is when we are lured by and accept radical positions just because they come packed in a little virtual message. As useful as the Internet has become, how misleading it can be! Long gone are the times when you only could share information if you were willing to take time to think, reflect, write, and distribute with the moderation that previous methods allowed. Today, through social media and electronic mail, we may freely use *Copy & Paste*, *Forward to All*, *Share*, *Reshare*, and so on. In an instant, you may have sent nonsensical, confusing, distracting, or even truly harmful content.

In conclusion, parents, teachers, and students must exert their unwavering commitment to develop their ideas, examining multiple and reliable sources and being critical of all. Most importantly, they must constantly inform and shape those ideas with Scripture. Never before has the message that true education is to “train young people to be thinkers, and not mere reflectors of other people's thought”⁴ been as relevant as it is today.

Julián Melgosa, PhD, is Associate Director of Education for the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists in Silver Spring, Maryland, U.S.A. He serves as Liaison for Higher Education and Advisor for the North American, South American, and Trans-European divisions. Dr. Melgosa also serves as the Associate Editor for *The Journal of Adventist Education* (International Editions).

Recommended citation:

Julián Melgosa, “Seeking Balance in a World of Extremes,” *The Journal of Adventist Education* 82:2 (April-June 2020): 3, 47.

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1. Ellen G. White, *Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1913), 74.
2. *Ibid.*, 74.
3. Ecclesiastes 7:16. *New King James Version* (NKJV). Scripture taken from the *New King James Version*®. Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson. Used by permission. All rights reserved.
4. Ellen G. White, *True Education* (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press, 2000), 12.