

A Year of Grace and Learning

Last year, on Monday, March 9, we had just completed the daily lunch hockey game and there were groups of students preparing for Big Help Day. I remember coming back to my office and, in passing, saying to Mo-Lan Chan and Nicky Jackson Colaco, maybe we should contact School Foodies to see if there are any changes to their delivery schedule due to the spread of COVID-19. And then, asking if we had contacted San Mateo County Public Health to get an update on the virus. A year ago, things were moving quickly. A year ago, it was undeniable we were on the threshold of something big.

Last week, Pal Thinnappan, Director of IT, reminded me that on Wednesday, March 11 of last year I had called an “Everyone Meeting” for 3:30 to let everyone know we were indeed shutting it down and transitioning to Distance Learning on Tuesday, March 17. I told everyone we had 3 days to prepare and we would remain in school for Thursday and Friday - and dedicate Monday, March 16 for preparation. I remember, vividly, that meeting - in the Library (we could all gather at that time), and the look of bewilderment, the deep breaths, the straight ahead stares that said - how are we going to do this?

Today is March 17. The intent of this note is to look back and ahead, in reflection and anticipation, over the past year and peer into next year.

I could write a manifesto of the rhythm of the past year - from the opening mantra of predictability and support, the international models of distance learning we reviewed as we started, to asynchronous Google Classroom to the synchronous Seesaw platform, from our anticipated return date of April 14 (We’ll be back after Spring Break!), to May 1, Shelter in Place Orders, not returning and our Drive Through Graduation, to the relentless summer planning based on speculative information, Red to Purple Tiers, partnering with The Village Doctor, Baseline Testing starting in August, waiver applications, quarantine periods, holiday travel, 3 household gatherings, positive/close and indirect contact tracing, HVAC systems, disinfection and handwashing, Magnus Health, temperature checks, vaccines and likely over 100 other time sensitive considerations. Instead, I’ll try to stick to the more impactful pieces for our school.

Before going there, and while we talk about the year in terms of how extraordinary and remarkable it has been, it has also been a year of unspeakable loss for people in our community and beyond. Families have lost loved ones to the virus - sisters, brothers, parents, grandparents, relatives and friends. I used the word “unspeakable” intentionally. Some of the loss we know about, some we don’t. Families have grieved within the community, others in the closeness of their homes and comfort of family. Any recounting of the past year must acknowledge, at the very least, the suffering in our community from the virus.

The Impact of Deciding to be in School All Day, Every Day and with All Students

In determining, way back in August, how our waiver would be constructed and presented, there were different models to consider. One week on, one week off? Monday, Wednesday, Friday in



person? Half-Days on site and afternoons with distance learning? 4 days on site with Fridays asynchronous so teachers can plan? 4 days on site and 10 days distance learning to have a built-in quarantine period? Still, the overarching question was actually whether we could open safely. The desire to return to in-person learning was not in question. The question was whether we could safely.

Ultimately, we decided to do what very few other schools decided - all day, every day, all students. We determined we could do this safely as on both campuses we had no internal hallways, and everything opened to the expanse of the outdoors, an abundance of classroom and outdoor space, strong HVAC and ventilation systems, and small class sizes.

However, as much as the logistics and infrastructure made sense - and I can't overstate this enough - it was really the dedication of the faculty and staff that brought us back all day, every day and with all students. While many schools were challenged by human resources issues, the Trinity teachers understood children learn best in person. And the faculty did all they could to be on campus for those students. This is not to say the teachers were not anxious or carefree - far from it. Of our 36 faculty and staff members, 19 have children at home and/or elderly family members. Nevertheless, they juggled, struggled, deliberated, and negotiated their home lives to navigate the very real risk to their own health and the health of their families to be with their students. In my 35 years in education and 19 years as a Head of School, I've never been more impressed - not even close - with the commitment of a faculty and staff.

Still, there are very real implications for teachers being on campus all day, every day and with all students. Specifically:

- Teachers have lost the majority of their prep time, 5 to 7 hours a week. Because some of the specialty classes are Zoomed into the classroom, teachers feel compelled to be with the classes almost all the time. Less tangible but worthy of comment, is just an ability to exhale and reset for the teachers. While it's true each teacher doesn't use every second of prep time to actually prep, there is the parallel need to step back, reflect and reset. There are no quiet places to just reflect. As an example, the UC faculty room was a place where teachers could decompress, collaborate, share with each other - and now it's essentially a transit hub to heat up food or pick up a beverage. And on the LC, teachers are even more restricted with bubble cohorts. In sum, because of social distancing, areas not accessible, and the isolation the teachers chronically experience, there's few places to collaborate, check in with colleagues and just exhale. This is true on both campuses as the bubble and stable cohort requirements keep teachers with their single group of children at almost all times.
- Working to run dual programs. While there's always room for iteration and improvement of the hybrid model of teaching and learning, it still takes the focus of the teachers for the ~10% of students in distance learning. Teachers are constantly aware of the distance learners, attempting to provide the parallel experience as instruction is tethered to a laptop while working with in-person and remote learners. Furthermore, there is a



constant, and daily, packaging of materials for students who choose to learn at home or return to school and this takes more time to prepare than it may seem.

- An occupation with COVID-19 protocols. It's not even a preoccupation, it's an occupation every second of every day. The teachers are on alert at all times of social distancing, traversing the campus, masks, hand washing, sharing of materials, segregation of spaces, and other. There's an inherent tension and it can be exhausting for the faculty.

To amplify a previous point, since August teachers have not been able to exhale. There's an inevitable and inherent tension that comes with COVID-19 and a congregate setting.

With this said, it's not lost on me the impact of COVID-19 on families and the stress it causes in the home. Parents trying to work full-time jobs with children at home, the body of work that states the impact on moms in particular and the division of labor at home, the mental health of children for a myriad of reasons, the lack of community connections, equity issues, and varying degrees of risk assessment among families. You all know this better than anyone - my point is the path of the virus has clearly been impactful at every level of our community.

The Impact on Teaching and Learning

Academic excellence has always been a cornerstone of Trinity. Since 1961, academic excellence has never wavered through the different eras of our state and country. Think about the 60's, 70's (hello Benefit), 80's, 90's, 2000's through 2021. That's a whole lot of range in culture and education. Nevertheless, at Trinity, the cornerstone of academic excellence has not moved.

What about over the past year? What's the impact on teaching and learning? Anyone who says social distancing where students cannot work in groups, in proximity to each other or their teacher hasn't had an impact on teaching and learning hasn't been watching very closely. The same could be said about the inability to share materials in core classes and specialty classes such as art, science, music, and design thinking. The same could be said for the social segregation for each bubble or stable cohort as they are designated areas for play, lunch, and snack - so no real mixing between classes. I suspect there has been content slippage. I mean, how could they're not be some slippage? To be sure, the Upper Campus lead teachers have put tremendous focus on the core content areas, the specialty teachers have been exceedingly creative. Lower Campus teachers continue to focus on an emergent curriculum and the classrooms are places of real joyful learning. Still it's not inconceivable given the implications of the virus, there'd be some content slippage. There's also the social and emotional learning factor - checking with the children to see how they're doing, their socialization given the restrictions and compression of remaining with an individual group throughout the day due to cohort requirements.

With that said, think of what our children have learned this year. I mean, really think about the areas that can't be measured. Areas such as resourcefulness, empathy, compassion, sympathy, perceptivity, gratitude, connectedness beyond themselves, the importance of the collective health of a community, sense of family. There's also, of course, loss, grieving, bewilderment, adversity,



loneliness and instability. These are lessons learned. Granted, these lessons have a shelf life and cannot be endured indefinitely, yet in this extraordinary year we can, in fact, find solace and comfort in the shelter of each other. And I have no doubt the children of Trinity have learned more this year than any other year - by far.

The Impact of Declining Cases and the Vaccine

In a nutshell, it's too early to tell. But I do think it's safe to say, even though we've had some false starts before, we have reason to be cautiously optimistic about a modified normal for the fall of 2021.

The positive case numbers are undeniable. And our teachers all have access to the vaccine. I received my first vaccination on March 7 (almost a year ago we were wondering what in the world was going to happen) and my next vaccination on March 27 - as an example. We are tentatively planning an outside and socially distanced graduation. We certainly look forward to a full reopening again in the fall with fewer variables in place for our students, faculty and staff and families.

There certainly are questions and we will continue to take our cue from the San Mateo County Office of Education and their Pandemic Recovery Framework. I anticipate students will still be required to wear face coverings at all times. However, will social distancing change? Will bubble or stable cohort guidelines change so students may mix by grade and have open access to all areas of the school? Will we be allowed to share materials to enhance the academic program and play times? These are not decisions we will have to make - they will be made for us through our regulating agencies. However, we will continue to do what we've done throughout the pandemic - be deliberative in our process and put the health of our community first and foremost.

It truly has been an extraordinary year of learning at Trinity. If you would have told me just one year ago, when the faculty and staff first assembled for that endible meeting in the Library, what everyone would navigate and learn over the next year, I wouldn't have believed it. Yet, here we are, one year later.

Please know how grateful I am for all your grace over the past year. The individual and collective grace from our families has been quite remarkable and hasn't gone unnoticed. After all, the tuition bill hasn't gone away, and the variables have been beyond something we can predict or count. We will continue to do all we possibly can with all students and every day to continue to learn, thrive and prosper as a school.

Thank you for your grace, partnership, patience, and commitment to all the children at Trinity.