

# How Catholic schools are weathering the storm

As businesses, schools and other institutions across the United States were shuttered to stem the spread of the novel coronavirus in mid-March, Catholic schools took on an extra challenge: finding ways to keep their students and staff not just learning, but connected – emotionally and spiritually – to the communities they have built.

They are using social media platforms such as Instagram, virtual meeting platforms such as Zoom, phone calls and video calls, and prayer. Lots of prayer.

Many Catholic schools invited their families to join Pope Francis in praying the Rosary on March 19 to ask for the “Father’s mercy to deliver us from this pandemic.”

Prayer and academics go hand in hand for Catholic schools, and teachers and principals are trying to make sure they continue that way.

“Prayer is happening online,” said Kristin Dixon, school superintendent for the Archdiocese of Seattle. “They are still participating in Lent. Some of them are tracking what students are doing to be kind, which is a Lenten practice. In terms of the participation in the sacraments, that’s a rough one for everybody.”

Some schools have invited families to go online to watch the daily Mass livestreamed by the bishop, she said, while others have had their own pastors celebrate Mass online.

“School has not ended for us; it’s continuing, just in a different format,” Dixon said. “It’s challenging for us to calibrate how much to ask and how not to overwhelm students.”

## Continuing the mission

In Atlanta, students who have been learning at home since March 17 have sent in pictures of themselves reading out loud to their stuffed animals, pictures of their names spelled out with dried beans or pasta – an activity designed to develop fine motor skills in young students – and pictures of the prayer stations they have set up, said Diane Starkovich, the superintendent of Catholic schools for the Archdiocese of Atlanta.

Catholic schools there had been closed for spring break when Georgia Gov. Brian Kemp recommended that schools close March 12. Teachers and administrators went to their schools on Monday, March 16, maintaining social distancing, to get plans in place for the next day, Starkovich said.

Atlanta has 18 archdiocesan Catholic schools and six independent Catholic schools.

The Archdiocese of Seattle has 75 Catholic elementary and high schools. All of them were ordered to close the doors to their buildings on March 16, not to reopen before March 30 at the earliest. Some of Seattle's Catholic high schools closed before that, Dixon said, noting that western Washington was the epicenter of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States from late January, when the first confirmed case of the disease was reported, through much of February.

"They saw the writing on the wall," she said.

The 92 schools in the Archdiocese of Washington also were closed from March 16 at least through March 27, said Wendy Anderson, associate superintendent for academics and school leadership. Many of them are helping students maintain their routine by starting the school day with online prayer.

They are also inviting students to watch livestreamed Masses, and one school livestreamed Stations of the Cross on March 20

because they planned to pray the stations as a school that day.

“We are so proud of our teachers,” Anderson said. “They are working harder than they’ve ever worked. Parents are calling them and emailing them and texting them questions. They’re also preparing week by week for whatever is going to happen.”

That included thinking about what would happen if a school suffered a loss to its staff or one of its families, and the rest of the community could not provide the kind of in-person support it normally does, she said.

“Our true mission is still being out there,” Anderson said. “Our spiritual selves are just as important as our academic selves. We have teachers using Google classroom, kids sending in videos.”

It’s more challenging for families who don’t have access to the internet at home, she said, especially with places like McDonald’s, Starbucks and local libraries that provide free Wi-Fi also closed.

“Or what do you do if you have a family with four or five kids and they’re sharing one computer?” she said. “We know not all of our families have access to the internet at the same level. If we’re not seeing the child log on, their teachers are calling to see if they can get the work to them another way.”

At least one school in the Washington archdiocese, St. Francis International in Silver Spring, Maryland, is continuing to provide meals on a to-go basis, Anderson said. Dixon said one of the high schools in Seattle, Seattle Prep, is doing the same.

## **Adjusting to virtual learning**

The situation has brought parents, many of whom are trying to their own jobs from home, into a new kind of partnership with

their children's teachers.

"Parents are very appreciative of all that the teachers are doing to stay in touch with the kids and stay in touch with them," Dixon said.

Dixon is also keeping in touch, seeing and responding to the pictures of students that families have posted, whether they are doing classwork at their kitchen tables or having recess at their local playgrounds. Some students have been putting on their uniforms to do their classwork, she said.

Teachers, meanwhile, are reading books online, either in livestreams or posted videos, and some schools are having students participate in announcements and opening prayers each day. Teachers at upper grade levels are holding virtual office hours.

"I'm really proud of them," Dixon said. "This has been such a challenge to step up to. Those teachers want to do right by their students, and they care about them."

But that doesn't mean teaching over the internet is easy.

"There's no expectation that they are going to slow down," Dixon said. "In the elementary schools, there's talk about, 'How are we going to assess them?'"

Schools in Seattle might have been in a slightly better position than some others, as they have done distance learning when schools have had to close for several days at a time due to snow, ice or other weather conditions.

"But I don't think anyone thought in terms of weeks," Dixon said.

Teachers and administrators in Atlanta were not taken entirely by surprise, but still had a lot of work to do, especially at the elementary school level, Starkovich said.

“We could see what was happening in the world,” she said. “We could see and predict that it was coming to the U.S. Our high schools were prepared for virtual online learning. They had done that in the past, for ice or inclement weather days, but this was new to our grade schools.”

## **The big picture**

While students and teachers got through the first few days with a can-do-it attitude and sense of adventure, school leaders worry that distance learning will become more difficult as time goes on.

“I think one of our greatest concerns is the mental health, the sense of isolation that these kids may feel,” Dixon said in a telephone interview on March 19. “Right now, it’s new and fresh. It’s going to get more challenging as we go. It’s been Zoom conferences all day long. The bricks and mortar aren’t as important now, I’m finding. The biggest challenge is going to be working with students in the areas of social-emotional health, and how do we break down the isolation that they will be feeling?”

Uniting in prayer – as school families as well as household families – is important.

“God is good,” Dixon said. “School is closed, but learning is wide open. The family that prays together, stays together.”

All of the school leaders said that the crisis has also been a learning opportunity for them.

“As we emerge from this, we’re going to look different,” Dixon said. “I don’t even know what that could be yet.”

Starkovich said it will definitely change the way the schools handle snow or ice days in the future.

“We don’t believe we’ll ever miss a day of school again for

bad weather, or because the gas is out or the power is out. We can continue. It has taught us a couple of things. It has taught us how important it is to stay in touch with one another and to communicate regularly. We need to communicate, we need to assure people we are here.”

*Michelle Martin writes from Illinois.*