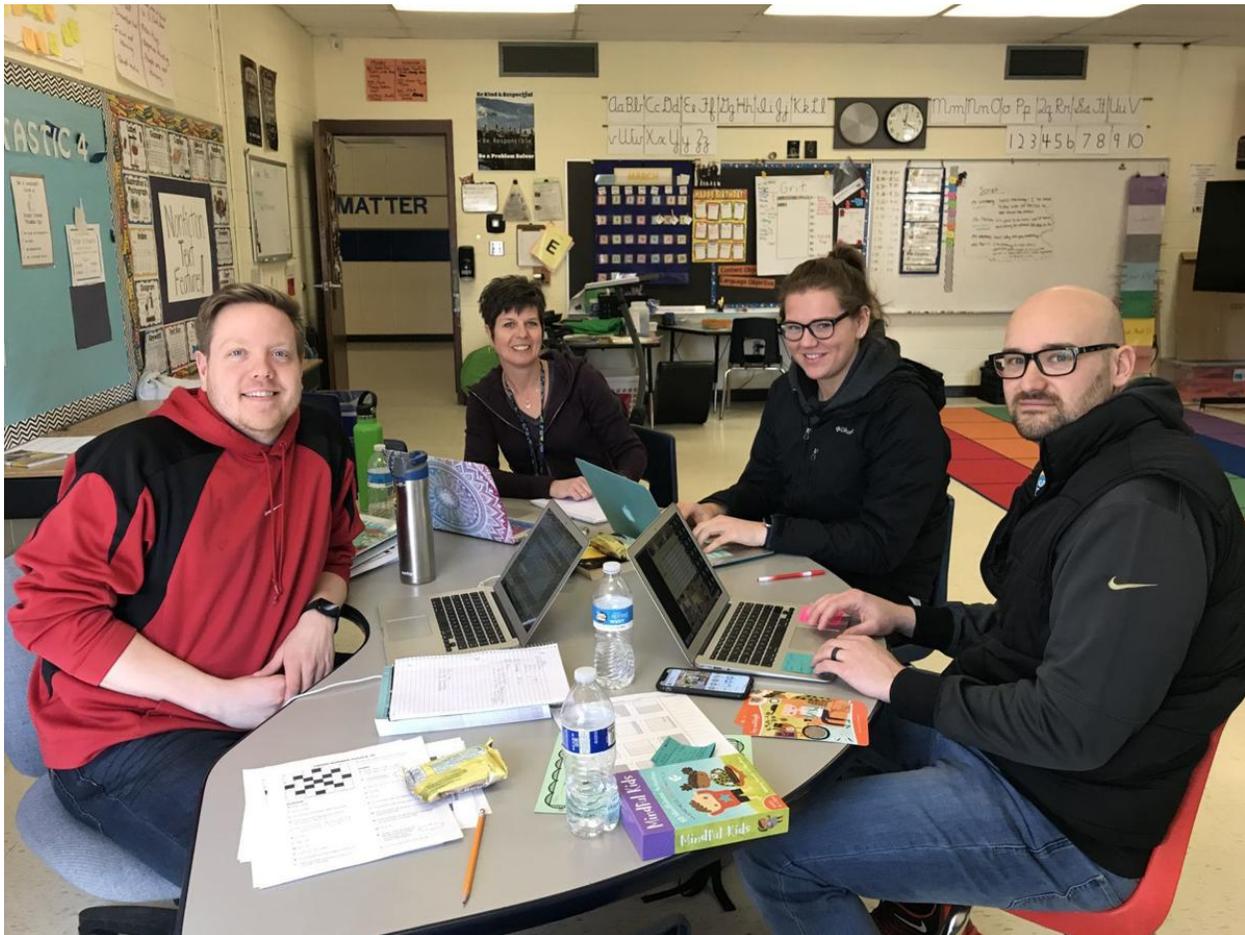


# District educators keep students engaged through virtual learning

Equity, availability of materials factors in how lesson plans are created

- Kimberly Wethal Unified Newspaper Group March 26, 2020



From left, Sugar Creek Elementary fourth grade teachers Chris Westberg, Lori Martin, Edgewood College student teacher Sarah Fetter and Justin Rippl wok on creating virtual learning curriculum on Tuesday, March 17.

- Photo submitted

Lori Martin found herself having to push fear aside to teach her students last week.

That fear was of being recorded, the Sugar Creek Elementary School fourth grade teacher said. But she decided having the students see her face on their first day of virtual learning, Thursday, March 19, was more important.

“It’s a different twist, even though they see you every day,” she said. “One of the teachers just said, ‘If you’re afraid, just get over it.’ So this morning, I got over it ... I read them the picture book and said, ‘Here goes nothing!’”

With schools closed throughout Dane County because of the COVID-19 crisis starting March 16, Verona Area School District teachers and staff began teaching their nearly 5,500 students with recorded video and online lessons that week.

COVID-19 is a respiratory illness that was declared a pandemic March 11 by the World Health Organization. It’s caused by the novel coronavirus, which is so contagious, the state of Wisconsin has limited public gatherings to 10 people or fewer and is encouraging households to avoid all unnecessary contact with other people.

It’s unclear how long schools will be teaching virtually. The state’s latest order relating to schools, on March 17, amended the original timeline of April 6 or later, requiring all public and private schools to be closed until further notice.

The district began discussing the potential need for online lessons at the beginning of March, and district assistant superintendent for academic services Laurie Burgos told the Press Thursday, March 19, the planning for it has been intense. That has included researching how other districts have handled it, discussing how to communicate with families, how to ensure access to Internet and technology and what platforms teachers should use.

Burgos said the need to be equitable to all students drove the building of a lesson plan structure to incorporate students who are English language learners, those who have Individualized Education Programs or are on 504 plans that remove barriers to education for students with disabilities.

“Those conversations were at the forefront when we were thinking about how are we going to get something like this up and running,” she said.

Having each student in the district already assigned an iPad helped ease the rollout of the virtual learning, Burgos said, noting that the devices all have filters on them that limit what is accessible.

At the elementary school level, students do much of their learning on the family friendly educational app Seesaw, while middle and high schoolers primarily use a learning management system called Canvas.

Justin Rippl, a fourth grade teacher at Sugar Creek, said the teacher team of himself, Martin and Chris Westberg are trying to make the experience of virtual education seem both normal and exciting at the same time to students.

“It’s creating those videos that are engaging for the kids to watch, but also having assignments created so they don’t feel like they’re just doing busy work, but they actually get to experience some new things,” Rippl said.

Westberg said he transitioned his in-person lesson plans into virtual learning by teaching five minute lessons on specific topics.

“We’re trying to adapt things like articles or books, so we’re reading them aloud and taking videos of us,” he said.

Burgos said the district’s staff – not just teachers, but learning aides and food service staff, too – took to the concept of virtual learning well and have done the best they could to keep students learning.

“This is one of those instances where a crisis arises, and everybody immediately rolled up their sleeves and rose to the challenge,” she said. “There are some beautiful things amidst the sadness and the mess.”

Going live

The planning for the virtual rollout was all hypothetical until it wasn’t, Stoner Prairie Elementary principal Tammy Thompson-Kapp said.

That started with creating a week of lesson plans at a glance.

So far, leading into the first two days before spring break, staff has risen to the occasion, she said.

“I’ve been monitoring it all morning, and it’s amazing to see all of the teachers push their lessons out,” she said March 19.

Brunner said the transition to virtual learning presents a significant learning curve for staff, and for the first two days last week, he was just encouraging his staff to get students to mentally engage with school again rather than expect perfection.

“We’re being incredibly gracious with the understanding of staff members who just aren’t quite there yet,” he said. “We don’t want people stressing themselves out, overwhelming themselves.”

Burgos said the first two days were a learning experience for the teachers and staff involved with creating the lesson plans.

“I know it’s not perfect, and we know there’s a lot of things we need to work out, but I’m really proud of the fact that all of us were able to pull together and be able to offer our students some learning opportunities,” she said. “We’ll get better at it.”

Savanna Oaks information technology teacher Greg Puent said he’s fortunate that most of the curriculum he’s now giving to students virtually was already being done through online platforms to begin with.

“It’s fun – the kids have been good, they’re asking good questions,” he said. “I can absolutely tell that they’re frustrated, but they’re sometimes frustrated in class, so it’s a different way of learning and it’s just going to take a little bit of time for everyone to get used to.”

Sugar Creek Elementary music teacher Melissa Bremmer will be teaching Sugar Creek students piano via an iPad app, which is part of her normal curriculum, having students play instruments with Garageband or sing songs to them through recordings.

“It’s neat to explore different ways they can engage with music at home, even if they don’t have all the instruments,” she said.

#### Equitable lesson plans

Puent said the district set teachers up well to jump into virtual learning by ensuring access to technology is as equal as possible for the students.

That has included providing hotspots to families who lack Internet access at home.

Ensuring equity – one of the five pillars of the district’s strategic plan – goes beyond making sure every student can access the assignments.

Brunner said he reminded staff they can’t assume all students have the ability to go outside for physical education or any supplies beyond the iPad, unlike in traditional classrooms.

That equity mindset has evolved into giving students options for their education based on what they have access to at home.

Glacier Edge Elementary art teacher Lois Feiner said her lesson plans include drawing challenges, where students don’t need more than a piece of paper and a pencil to get to work.

The challenges also vary in difficulty, she said, from anything a kindergartener could draw to more intricate drawings for older students such as monster trucks of their own design or three-dimensional structures. Students are also allowed to use art applications that come preloaded on their iPads.

“The biggest change has been the range of supplies that kids may or may not have at home, and then how to find step-by-step directions online to show kids what I mean when I might be talking about crayon resist or drawing three-dimensional,” she said.

Providing additional support for students the way it’s done in the classroom is a work in progress for her staff, Thompson-Kapp said.

“We know that, for some kids, they’re going to have a grown-up at home who’s able to help them with their work, and then other families who have to work,” she said. “We know that there’s going to need to be some component that addresses the barriers that might exist for some kids more than others.”

#### Re-creating the classroom

Martin said that while virtual education keeps students engaged, it doesn’t replace the interactions teachers have with them on a daily basis.

“My job is working with kids and people, and you’re just sort of shocked that we are where we are when you didn’t think it would get to that level,” she said.

Feiner said watching students create is what gives her a sense of purpose in her job, and she found the idea of not interacting with students in the days that followed the shutdown difficult.

Being able to interact with them virtually has allowed her to gain some of that purpose back.

“We need students, we need that human interaction as human beings, but definitely as teachers,” she said. “As an elementary art teacher, the act of creating art is so rewarding, and so fulfilling to see students who may struggle in other areas find success in art is beyond what I could put into words.”

Creating a sense of normalcy for staff and students is something Thompson-Kapp said she wants to provide for both her staff and students at Stoner Prairie.

That normalcy showed up on the first day of virtual school as a friendly face and a familiar routine. Thompson-Kapp said she recorded a video of herself that introduced the concept of virtual learning, as well as a guided affirmation similar to what the students do during breakfast time on Mondays.

“We’re trying to get our faces out so that kids can see us and hear us,” she said. “I think it’s super reassuring to them ... as grown-ups, what we need to do is provide as much regular structure as possible for our kids.”

Though Bremmer is disappointed she won’t be teaching in-person for the foreseeable future, there are some benefits.

“It gives us an opportunity to rethink things in new ways, and rethink possibilities, and I think that’s exciting from a learning aspect,” she said.

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