

Bucks Bulletin is a project of the students and staff of Washington Island School.

Washington Island School provides 'virtual' learning

By Margaret Foss

(Editor's note: The full Bucks Bulletin is on hiatus in January.)

"Virtual Learning" is a system where students and teachers engage in school work via the internet and computer connections.

How does your school do this? What does it look like? How are students, teachers, and parents impacted by this 21st century mode of operation, necessitated by the uptick in COVID-19 cases?

During 2021-2022, the school reverted to school-wide virtual learning for four weeks; two just prior to winter break, and two just after. Students were provided with computers, textbooks, and all materials necessary to remain at home during these weeks. Teachers conducted classes either from their classrooms, or from their homes.

While schedules and daily work vary from class to class, and grade level to grade level, there are some amazing internet platforms teachers can use. Most teachers conduct classes via Zoom or Google Meets. These two platforms allow teachers and students to see and hear one another on their screens.

Many teachers use Google Classroom, an organizational platform where all class information and guidance can be placed and accessed (via shared access links) by teachers and students, all in one place. Students and teachers have access to the Infinite Campus system the school uses to manage records so that they can monitor their grades.

For safety and security, the school also subscribes to Go Guardian, a system that allows teachers to monitor student activity and, in some instances, restrict online activity. Of course, email and phone contact are used daily as well.

Because the school has experienced virtual learning in recent years, much has been learned about how it can be done with fidelity to standards and curriculum, and with the highest expectation for student engagement possible. Your educational staff are avid learners themselves. They have significantly advanced their virtual teaching skills and now offer many options, tools, and platforms that make their lessons captivating, fun, and rigorous.

So, how does this all come together in the daily virtual learning experience?

Teachers run a daily schedule and routine, utilizing various tools within lessons, or as part of assignments. Students are expected to attend on their computers, interacting in a variety of ways as prescribed by their teachers. Part of the time, students are literally interacting via their

computers. The rest of the time, students can work independently and reach out with questions as necessary. The following are examples of tools and platforms teachers can use within lessons:

Slide Decks: often containing explanations, publications/text, procedures, links to videos, websites, galleries, etc.

Pear Deck: an interactive slide deck that allows students to answer questions within the platform.

Video Links: web addresses to access video material; including recorded lessons

Galleries: where students and teachers can upload documents, photos, and videos Storyboardthat: "drag and drop" creation platform on which to create visuals for teaching, learning and communicating, for use by groups, teachers, students, etc.

Kahoot: game-based learning platform

Quizizz: gamified quizzes, lessons, presentations, and flashcards

Jamboard: interactive whiteboard used for sharing ideas

Google Documents: where students compose text, share with their teachers and/or others, and can receive commentary, feedback, etc. with their teacher(s) and/or peers

Document Cameras: underneath which teachers can write/draw, and students can see this on their screens (like a digital chalkboard)

Digital Textbooks: all textbook material uploaded to the web for computer access.

As one might expect, a wide variety of opinions and feelings surround virtual learning. No doubt, this approach has its pros and cons. Most resounding in feedback received from teachers is that students have been attentive, patient, cooperative, flexible, engaged, responsible, and respectful. The words "rock stars" were used by several teachers to describe their students. For some students, focus and attention is even improved during virtual learning, perhaps because of lesser distractions.

As one teacher reported, "For the most part, I believe we are far better off together, at school, but some students excel in any context, and for a unique group of students virtual may even be better for them in some ways. I have had several students who had a very tough time at school who did absolutely amazing in virtual learning."

For some students, learning to self-advocate when needing support has been enhanced.

Students have demonstrated patience, kindness, and understanding

while coping with sometimes glitchy and frustrating technology. Some students already had experience with the tools being used, and some had to learn how to use them. Prior experience with some digital platforms, both during in-person school and during virtual learning periods allowed for easier transition to at-home learning. Some students have strong and consistent internet access, and some not so much. Everyone has stepped up their technology skills and learned to cope with new frustrations.

One teacher reported, "My students had to create an infomercial using their persuasive writing skills. Their level of creativity was absolutely incredible for this assignment. Some students wrote and performed their own jingle, directed and edited a commercial using video software, or practiced their best cheesy infomercial voice and presented it in front of the class."

Another teacher heard from her student, "You're the reason I woke up this morning. I just wanted to see you."

On the flip side, one teacher states, "It always surprises me that I can switch all teaching methods, supplies, lessons, activities, etc., on a dime and make it happen. It is not easy and is not ideal. It requires a lot of extra work and time. I was not taught how to teach students virtually in my teacher preparation edu-

cation, yet I do the best I can to make sure I keep up the learning for every child."

Parents in our district have had to "step up to the plate" as well, and teachers report wonderful cooperation and support. With family preparations to have all materials ready and making sure students are in class at designated times in environments conducive to schoolwork, teachers have been able to optimize learning time.

Parents have also needed to monitor and guide at-home participation and work on assignments, especially at the middle and elementary school level. In most cases, school would have been almost impossible to run without such amazing help from our parents.

The school has now moved to a slightly different approach wherein families may choose either in-person learning or at-home virtual learning (hybrid). This means that some of our students are physically in the classrooms, and some are connected via their computers from home.

Once again, teachers and students pivot and remain engaged in new and different ways. Utilizing the technology described above, alternative scheduling, and maintaining constant communication, we can be proud of everyone in our school community as they continue to demonstrate flexibility, patience, resilience, and focus on learning.

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