

GREENE COUNTY RECORD



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Students' struggle amid pandemic

BY KATHLEEN BORRELLI
Staff Writer

Editor's note: this is part one in a series about meeting the needs of students during the pandemic.

In 1937, a polio outbreak in the Chicago area forced schools to delay opening by several weeks, prompting widespread alarm about lost instructional time. Innovative educators still found a way by coordinating efforts through local libraries, newspapers and even going so far as to have public school teach-

ers read lessons by radio . Virtual learning may not be an entirely new concept, but its widespread use throughout the world due to the COVID-19 pandemic has led to an emergence of several major issues—everything from struggling to create equitable access to the internet to food insecurity.

Sarah Baran, a licensed clinical social worker who has worked for many years as a family liaison at Nathanael Greene Primary and Elementary schools, has taken on the role of

school community liaison during the pandemic. In this position she serves all five public schools in the district and is the primary school social worker for nearly 3,000 students.

“I’ve had the privilege of working alongside Ms. Baran over the past five months, and I can, without reservation, say that we would not be where we are today without her tireless effort in support of our families,” said Greene County Public Schools (GCPS) Assistant Superintendent Dr. Bryan



PHOTO BY BRIAN MELLOTT/FILE PHOTO

Grace (ninth grade), Sophie (seventh) and Matthew (sixth) Mellott started school virtually in September, and Chowder the cat couldn't wait to get in on the laptop action.

Huber at the Dec. 9 school board meeting. “She is our go-to person when we have a family in need, a child that is disengaged or a student who just simply is not being successful for See **VIRTUAL**, Page A3

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whatever reason.”

Along with Morgan Taylor, a social work intern from Virginia Commonwealth University, Baran began making home visits to families over the summer, helping to bridge the gap in registrations when families were making the difficult decision whether to send their children back to school in-person or to opt for the 100% virtual learning model.

“During the first three weeks that we were back from the summer break, Morgan and I did about 40 home visits,” Baran said during a presentation to the school board in December. “We just started knocking on doors ... essentially, this was an easy solution. It was taking the technology with us, taking the hotspots and the laptops ... and we were able to register most of our students right there on the spot.”

Once Baran and Taylor were visiting families in their homes, a host of issues presented themselves.

“During our home visits, we recognized new barriers (to learning),” Baran said. “The barriers are significant and numerous ... the learning platforms themselves can create anxiety for students, a fear of failure, feeling overwhelmed. All students have different academic abilities and ability to decipher what’s being asked of them from various platforms.”

To protect the privacy of students and families, no names have been used in these examples from Baran or the school administrators.

“Just a few weeks back, I was working with a seventh-grade student on an assignment that he was struggling with,” Baran recalled. “We’d been working diligently for about an hour, and there was a lot of flipping back and forth between tabs—one to give information, one to plug information in—and after about an hour, he closed the wrong tab. He closed the tab with all of his work on it, and he was so defeated. It was an easy solution—I knew how to get back to retrieve his work, but he didn’t. And this is just an example of how the platform itself defeated the student.”

In addition to struggles with the technology, Baran described how some students have to struggle with slow internet, with lack of a personal workspace in the home or with disruptions and distractions of other family members.

“Some of our students have a learning space set up in the garage where it’s hot in early September and it’s cold now ... sometimes the dog won’t quit barking so the student can hear what’s being said. Our students’ learning spaces greatly impact their ability to learn,” she said.

Some students have taken on additional responsibilities due to parents working outside of the home while they are learning virtually.

“Just this week, I was in the home of a seventh-grade student,” Baran said. “She’s falling behind and she’s struggling with self-confidence ... and here’s what makes it hard: she’s the primary caregiver to the 8-year-old child in the home. He’s a second-grader and he also needs to be logged in. So she gets him up, she feeds him, she makes sure that he’s in class on time ... but as

a result, she’s late or she’s not in her Zoom session. When she sits down to do her work, she’s missed all instruction and she has no idea what to do.”

In the given example, the student genuinely wants to do well in school but is being hampered by her responsibilities in the home. In some homes, as many as six to eight students are all trying to log in and learn at the same time, on the same possibly lacking internet connection, with varying needs.

“I think it’s pretty common in our community ... that the older sibling is responsible for getting the younger sibling up and on the bus in a typical school year,” Baran said. “But now that’s just magnified with everybody being at home.”

Besides siblings helping one another get ready to learn, many parents are also working from home during the pandemic, adding to potential conflicts over space, internet access and confusion during the day for some.

“A lot of parents are working from home, so ... we have a lot of learning coaches who are distracted with a lot of stressors in their lives that they also are responsible for,” said Regina Hissong, assistant principal at Nathanael Greene Elementary School and virtual learning coordinator for the county’s three elementary schools.

In addition to Baran, administrators from each school participate in home visits as well as special education coordinators, counselors and teachers.

“It’s not that they’re on a schedule and I’m scheduled to go see people—I just get phone calls and text messages and voice-mails and emails during the day and I just jump and go,” Baran said. “Some days I might do four; I might go to the same family twice in the same day.”

According to Hissong, home visits often include delivery of learning materials, from desks to books, virtual learning supplies that have run out or gotten lost or new chargers for devices.

“We quickly distribute components of the Chromebooks like chargers that got chewed by a dog or whatever—anything that would be a barrier to a student joining their class, we try to in a timely manner rectify so that they can continue,” she said.

According to Hissong, one of the most important

Barriers to Learning

Student	Parent/Family	Environment	Basic Needs
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Anxiety Fear of Failure Overwhelmed Academic Ability Lack of Control Helping Siblings Not Feeling Safe No Adult Support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Language Number of Students Substance Use Conflicts Tech Ability Reading Ability Communication Working parents 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Slow Internet No Learning Space Mess/Distractions Domestic Violence Physical Abuse Emotional Abuse Neglect Chaos 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of... Heat Food Consistent Shelter Transportation Connectedness

Barriers to Learning slide from Sarah Baran's presentation to the school board Dec. 9.

COURTESY PHOTO

lessons of this pandemic has been learning the best methods of communication for families.

“Some families we text with, some families we use SeeSaw messenger, others rely on their email and that’s how they want to communicate ... and others just want you to pick up the phone and call them,” she said. “Knowing each family’s best mode of communication has been the lifeline to every bit of the work that we’ve been doing because there’s not one answer that fits all families.”

While in the early weeks of the school year, most of the problems cropping up centered on technology and the newly designed learning platforms for students, there were deeper issues at play that began to surface.

“Especially early on, what we found was that people just needed support getting organized and figuring out how to be a virtual family, how to navigate the platforms, how to use what we gave them,” Baran said. “Sometimes they just needed the supplies, sometimes they needed to be walked through how to use Canvas or SeeSaw, but the other things are sprinkled in there—the support with food or family trauma.”

“Morgan and I have been witness to chaos in homes; we’ve been witness to mess, distractions, neglect, abuse and substance use. We’ve witnessed lack of food, lack of heat, lack of consistent shelter and lack of medical care,” she continued. “Sometimes our students are lacking that also-important need to feel connected to their school

and their peers, to feel connected to their teachers and their counselors, to feel a part of their community. Our kids in the virtual world often feel like they’re alone and they’re the only ones struggling.”

Hissong agreed that the past year has really helped school administrators and teachers learn empathy for the struggles that families are facing. She recalls speaking to a pregnant mom whose frequent doctor visits interfered with the older child’s learning schedule.

“We’ve talked to them when they’ve been in labor, we’ve talked to them as they’ve been going through COVID themselves or other family members experiencing COVID—to varying degrees from asymptomatic to very, very ill and hospitalized,” Hissong said. “We’ve talked with families about how to discipline their students, and I feel like that conversation

came after we built some pretty strong relationships to where they really felt like we saw them as partners. We do see parents as our partners in this; our collaboration with them as learning coaches has been more important than ever, and their empathy for what we do has grown.”

Overwhelmingly, the family response to the efforts of Baran and others has been positive.

“What I’ve learned through all of this is we have to meet our families where they are, and right now our families are at home,” Baran said. “My experience has been nothing but positive; our families are so grateful when we come to them. I will say that home visits quickly became the most rewarding part of my work.”

With school board budget season under way, many administrators are focused on how to fund positions for more caring individuals like Baran in

the school system so they can address the needs that they know will be greater than ever when all students return to in-person learning in the coming year.

“We have kids in crisis across our division, and that looks different in different households,” said GCPS Superintendent Dr. Andrea Whitmarsh at the December board meeting. “Kids have different barriers, and we need people actively working on those every day that that is their primary role—we have people across the division doing that, but they’re also responsible for other things.”

“There are a lot of mental health issues that are not seen—you can see that in the rates of suicide, depression and things like that,” said At-Large member Jason Tooley. “It takes special people to get out there and knock on doors

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checking on our kids.”

Throughout this challenging school year, administrators and support staff have also gained awareness and grown in their relationships with each other as colleagues and as a community, according to Baran.

“I think that we’ve grown as a school community; as coworkers and colleagues, I feel like I know people on a different level than I previously did,” she said. “Regina (Hisson) and I have worked together for years, but it’s different now—I feel like I see her in a new light. I see her full of compassion and innovation and I can come to her with anything and before I can finish a thought, she’s already working on a solution. Seeing people through a new light in the compassion that we have for our students is just astounding and sometimes a little emotional for me.”

Hisson said the feeling was certainly mutual.

“Sarah hits the ground running—I can’t

tell you how many times she’s responded to a family’s needs and personalized it by delivering supplies,” she said. “She makes sure that families that don’t have transportation or don’t have the ability to leave the home in a timely manner—she makes sure that it’s in their hands so that the students can continue with their learning, which has been an unsung amazing part of this whole system. If we didn’t have a Sarah Baran—if we didn’t have somebody willing to drop everything and make that the priority—then there’s a lot of little things that could have halted a lot of important learning.”

According to Huber, the most important thing to come out of this pandemic has been the partnerships formed with families.

“When we are working with families, it’s very much a collaborative effort to make decisions and navigate tough situations with nothing but the success of their child at the forefront of the conversation,” he said. “If we can transfer that type of strong partnership into the future and build on those, that’s how we will be successful.”

What will learning look like after the pandemic is over?

BY KATHLEEN BORRELLI

Staff Writer

Editor's note: this is part two in an ongoing series about meeting the needs of students during the pandemic.

When schools closed for two weeks last March 13, no one could have imagined the strange and unprecedented year ahead for education. Amazing educators and administrators have gone above and beyond to make the 2020-21 school year the best it can be despite the ongoing pandemic and the unique challenges of students in vastly different learning formats, but now it's time to look to the future, according to Andrea Whitmarsh.

"We're not putting the school system back exactly the way it was last March," said Whitmarsh, superintendent of schools. "Our needs have changed as a result of the pandemic. There are a lot of benefits that are going to come out of this, but there are many, many needs that are coming out of this."

Assistant Superintendent Dr. Bryan Huber agreed.

"We have a saying as of late that, boy, would it be a shame to put things back just like we had them prior to the pandemic," he said in a board presentation Jan. 19. "This is an opportunity to do

"We know that the future that lies ahead is uncertain and that school will most likely never be exactly what it was prior to the pandemic. ... But one thing that we do recognize is that we must develop the clearest picture possible of the academic, social-emotional and mental health needs of our students."

—Dr. Bryan Huber, Greene County Public Schools Assistant Superintendent

things correctly, to really make sure that we're addressing the need in its entirety and not just trying to put Band-Aids on ... we know the challenges are going to be great, we know the needs are going to be great, but we have a fantastic school division and fantastic community that really is going to respond, and I have hope."

The majority of Greene County students are learning virtually at least part of the time, but roughly 40% are completely virtual learners. Elementary school students are able to be in-person every day or virtual, while middle and high school students are either 100% virtual or in a hybrid learning format.

"Unlike many school divisions across the state, we have implemented a Return to Learn plan that we have luckily been

able to keep in place since Sept. 8," Huber said. "However, in order to accomplish this feat we have asked our teachers, our leaders and just about every staff member to assume new responsibilities and transform their work to meet the needs of our students and families."

Students have dealt with uncertainty and stress, with isolation from their peers, and with fears over the coronavirus that has dominated headlines for nearly a full year of their short lives, according to School Community Liaison and licensed social worker Sarah Baran.

"We've been witness to mess, distractions, neglect, abuse and substance use; we've witnessed lack of food, lack of heat, lack of consistent shelter and

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lack of medical care,” Baran said during a Dec. 9 presentation to the school board in which she reviewed her experiences visiting virtual students at their homes to resolve everything from technology issues to delivering needed food and supplies.

“Sometimes our students are lacking that also-important need to feel connected to their school and their peers, to feel connected to their teachers and their counselors, to feel a part of their community,” she continued. “Our kids in the virtual world often feel like they’re alone and they’re the only ones struggling.”

With budget season in full swing and planning for the fiscal year 2022 underway, it is now time to plan for what a return to “normalcy” might look like, and how to help students recover from all they have lost.

“Certainly the hope of many people is that we will return to a normal school year for the 2021-22 school year, and while we are hopeful that could possibly be the case, the reality is that we must prepare for new challenges like we have never experienced before,” Huber said. “We know that the future that lies ahead is uncertain and that school will most likely never be exactly what it was prior to the pandemic ... But one thing that we do recognize is that we must develop the clearest picture possible of the academic, social-emotional and mental health needs of our students.”

It is clear that the issues we have seen over the past year will not magically disappear once the pandemic subsides and businesses and schools are back to full capacity. What is less clear is what the lingering effects of the year might be, or how differently they might impact people based on their circumstances.

As part of the planning for the upcoming school year, school administrators are planning a comprehensive set of surveys, ongoing assessments, interviews and screenings of students to collect data on anticipated needs.

“As we traditionally operate, 80% of students have their needs met in the classroom through core instruction and the efforts of their classroom teachers alone,” Huber said. “Fifteen percent of students ... are lagging behind their peers and will need some form of intervention to include the work of school counselors, intervention teachers, specialists, etc. Tier three students represent a very small portion of our population and these students would require intensive supports and interventions involving multiple people, programs and resources.”

This “tiered” approach to interventions is likely to change in a big way when the full student population returns to in-person learning, which most expect to happen this fall if COVID-19 vaccination efforts are enough to stem the tide of infections. The majority of Greene County staff received the second round of vaccinations at a clinic held at the schools this past weekend.

“What could very well be the possibility of returning students in the beginning of the 2021-22 school year is that our model of intervention and instruction will become overwhelmed with need,” Huber continued. “While we do not yet know and completely understand the effects of this pandemic, we know that many of our virtual students are falling further and further behind and our students in the blended model need more face-to-face time with their teachers.”

“We could potentially be facing a significant challenge where instead of 80% of our students in that tier one category, we’re potentially only able to serve 50 while the other 50% will require additional interventions above and beyond their classroom teacher,” he continued. “As you can imagine, this will require us to think differently about resources, staffing, schedules, intervention, remediation, professional development and much, much more.”

The challenges faced by such a long period of absence from school run the gamut from learning loss to mental health and behavioral concerns, and will require additional staff to address the wide variety of new or exacerbated needs.

“The needs are not going to be addressed in a single year,” Huber said. “We are anticipating a multi-year, three-to-five year, timeline where we are going to have to be addressing these needs ... The social and emotional needs are going to be there—there’s certainly this scary sense of isolation that we continue to see in our kids that aren’t coming (to school in person) where they’re becoming more and more isolated from their peers, from their teachers, and addressing that ... is tied in to increased mental health concerns for students. Of course, that’s going to have a long-term impact.”

In addition to the social-emotional and mental health concerns, there is the simple fact of learning loss for many students that will take time to catch up.

“The learning loss is tremendous in

some cases, because for whatever reason the model wasn’t able to meet the child’s needs—at no fault of anyone involved, just because of the way things are,” Huber said. “It’s going to take us multiple years to regain ground and help students recover to on-grade-level skills, particularly in literacy. If a student gets behind a grade level or more in reading, that can’t be fixed in a year.”

One source of help comes from the newest allocation of CARES Act funding, called the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations, or CRRSA-ESSER II fund. These funds were released Jan. 11 in the amount of \$1,491,894 for Greene, to be reimbursed over the next three years through the Virginia Department of Education’s grant management system. This fund allows for expenditures dating from the March 13, 2020, closure of schools, through September 2023.

According to state guidance presented at the Jan. 27 school board budget work-session, these funds can cover COVID-19 mitigation strategies as with the previous funds, but can also be used to “address learning loss among students ... by administering and using high-quality assessments that are valid and reliable, to accurately assess students’ academic progress and assist educators in meeting students’ academic needs, including through differentiated instruction.”

During 2020, Greene County schools received \$508,410 in CARES Act funding in order to cover needs, such as technology to facilitate distance learning and improve WiFi access for virtual students and provide meals to families as well as all the masks, hand sanitizer, cleaning materials and other preventive solutions for the in-person population. Additional funds were allocated that stretch out into the next year.

“The learning loss—we’re going to feel it in real time for the next three to five years, so it’s important that we’re very careful and deliberate on how these funds are spent,” Whitmarsh said.

The fiscal year 2022 budget planning includes several new positions designed to take the burden off classroom teachers when dealing with the expected high number of students needing additional support when they return this fall.

“Kids have different barriers, and we need people actively working on those every day that that is their primary role—we have people across the division doing that, but they’re also responsible for other things,” Whitmarsh said.

Examples include the budgeted position of online learning coordinator, which during the longest and most extensive use of online learning has remained unfilled—these duties have instead been divvied up amongst building administrators and teachers, since uncertainties in state budget funding last year prevented many anticipated new hires.

In addition to the online learning coordinator, the budget includes three new school psychologists, a board certified behavior analyst, several new school counselors, additional reading and intervention specialists and a new position called a student success coach.

“Student success coaches provide individualized coaching, mentoring and encouragement for students to increase their academic, social and emotional success,” Whitmarsh said at the Feb. 10 board meeting. “These ensure that the whole child gets the supports that are needed and that the barriers are removed for students so that they can be more successful. Those will be deployed into the individual schools and it’s more like a human services position than a teacher.”

The budget includes funding for five of these success coaches—one for each school.

When it comes to the uncertainties facing educators for the coming year, Huber says the partnerships they’ve formed over the tumultuous 2020 year will be the district’s biggest asset moving forward.

“When we are working with families, it’s very much a collaborative effort to make decisions and to navigate tough situations with nothing but the success of their child at the forefront of the conversation,” he said last month. “If we can transfer that type of strong partnership into the future and build on those, that’s how we will all be successful. It doesn’t matter if it’s a pandemic or we’re back into some sort of normalcy—that partnership with our families and with our parents is probably one of the most critical determining factors for kids to be successful.”

For more on the struggles of virtual students during the pandemic, read “Students’ struggle amid pandemic” at shorturl.at/tuIK7.

For more information on how CARES Act funds have been used to address COVID-19 mitigation measures at the schools this year, read “GCPS outlines use of CARES Act funds” at shorturl.at/ekxC4.

For more on the school board budget, which is slated to be approved at the school board meeting Feb. 24—after press time—read “GCPS budget slightly higher” at shorturl.at/ewJPF7.

Special Ed is extra challenge during a pandemic

BY KATHLEEN BORRELLI

Staff Writer

Editor's note: this is part three in an ongoing series about meeting the needs of students during the pandemic.

Whether they're attending school virtually or in person during the pandemic, all students have faced unprecedented challenges in the past year—but some more than others. According to the most recent Greene County School Board budget report, there are 421 students with disabilities in the county's public school system this year—that is more than 14% of total enrollment.

Supporting this population during the challenging school year has taken quite a bit of planning, according to Greene County Public Schools (GCPS) Director of Special Services Dr. Wendy Mitchem.

"Each student's team met prior to the start of the school year," Mitchem said. "If we did not feel that virtual instruction was the appropriate format, we said it and we asked those parents to consider

letting their kids come in (for) the in-person format. ... We also knew that in some instances, virtual would be OK for students."

For each individual student, needs and supports were discussed based on the selected learning method to ensure they were able to be as successful as possible.

"We tweaked and adjusted and talked through the supports that might have worked for a student in person but would need to be adjusted for virtual learning," Mitchem said. "We put supports in place to—even on asynchronous days—call or Zoom with kids to help them plan their schedule for the day, those organizational types of supports."

In addition to scheduling support, Mitchem said some students benefit from small-group work or additional specialized instruction in literacy.

"A lot of purposeful strategic planning went in to how we scheduled, what supports were needed and how we could continue to execute," she said. "We con-



School administrators discussed the various challenges faced by Greene County students with the Greene County Record in January. Clockwise from top left: Nathanael Greene Elementary School Assistant Principal Regina Hissong, Greene County Public Schools Assistant Superintendent Dr. Bryan Huber, School Community Liaison and licensed social worker Sarah Baran and Director of Special Services Dr. Wendy Mitchem.

stantly progress monitor, because I can tell you that for our students with disabilities, we've met on some kids four,

five, six times since September—continually adjusting their plans as the school

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year progresses to meet the need."

Not all special education students have been able to make it work with the structure of school this year. According to the Feb. 10 school board meeting, the number of students with disabilities is slightly lower than in past years. Mitchem said this is because some have been placed in other facilities since the onset of the pandemic.

"Those students, over the course of the closure in the spring, have been placed through parental agreements with Region Ten or ... have been placed outside of the home through foster care prevention or foster care social services," she said. "We've had some students choose to homeschool, but the biggest jump has been in the number of students in places—not for educational reasons—being served in private residential settings and acute treatment centers."

For some families, the choice of whether to send their child to school in person was a balancing act between the needs of the child and of the family. Stanardsville mother of two Christine Kaiser said the decision was not an easy one.

"My kids won't sit still long enough at home to accomplish assignments—there are no consequences or incentives that work to get them to do their tasks," she said. "I am in a high-risk category for COVID, so I didn't want to send them in person, but I really had no choice because they need to learn and it wasn't going to happen at home for us."

Maren Kaiser, who suffers from sensory issues and ADHD, is in second grade at Nathanael Green Elementary School (NGES) and her younger sister Elorie attends Nathanael Greene Primary School (NGPS).

"The eldest, Maren, has bitten and chewed holes through every single mask, every day, accruing a ton of financial cost to keep replacing masks for her," Kaiser said. She noted that the younger girl has no apparent issues with wearing a mask.

For children with disabilities in public schools, Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) and 504 plans outline the specific supports, adaptations or related services that will remove barriers for the student during the school day. These sup-

ports are provided at no cost to families through the school system and are reviewed at least annually with school staff and parents.

According to NGES Assistant Principal Regina Hissong, the meetings with families prior to the start of the 2020-21 school year have led to an increased understanding of how these supports work.

"We needed to find creative ways of making these things happen or be replicable at home," Hissong said. "For example, when a student has a 504 plan that calls for accommodations like close proximity to the teacher or extended time for work ... the parent is learning what those terms mean and also how to implement them at home. The way that the instruction rolls out a lot of times can be controlled by the parent—they're the ones putting those supports in place, so being ready to coach them and patiently waiting for them to learn has been really essential."

For in-person learners, kids having less social time and less physical movement during the day (due to COVID-19 prevention measures) have been offset by extra breaks and recess. For kids who are learning virtually, teachers have reminded parents that it's still important to allow those kids time to take breaks, especially if the majority of their day is spent in front of a computer screen.

"There's breaks built in throughout the virtual day, but we've had to really be direct with learning coaches and remind them that that's not a time to relax—it's a time to be active," Hissong said. "So for example, when a student has a break from virtual learning, they shouldn't plop down on the couch and watch TV—they need to run around with their siblings, run around with the dog, go play outside or ride their bike in the driveway a little bit. Coaching parents to really think about it like that has helped them support their learners a little bit more effectively because we had a lot of really lethargic students that would come back in the afternoon because they've sat in front of a screen or a TV, so we really had to look critically at those kinds of things."

According to Hissong, in some situations the school has been able to provide materials to virtual families such as Therabands, which are a ribbon of stretchy material often used for physical therapy.

"There's been a lot of parents who are trying to figure out ways for their kids to be mobile in their spot in front of the computer," she said. "Stuff like Therabands that we would typically have in the classroom for teachers, we've just asked the parents, 'do you have a chair in your house where we could give you some of this Theraband stuff and the kids could kind of bounce in that,' or just little things that they can play with that are fidgety ... those are some of the innate things that educators would do in the classroom, but teaching parents those tools has been really important."

School social worker Sarah Baran has worked one-on-one in home visits to students to troubleshoot issues with virtual learning since accepting the position of School Community Liaison with the county.

"We have a sixth-grade student with some learning difficulty, and I showed up early on to help her engage," Baran said in a presentation to the school board Dec. 9. "For this student, virtual learning was much like ordering a new bookshelf from IKEA—it comes in all the pieces and it comes with a set of directions that's hard to decipher. For this student, it's like having all the pieces spread out in front of you and the directions are there, but you can't read the directions no matter how hard you study them."

In addition to managing individual situations as they arise, part of Baran's work in visiting virtual families has included delivering supplies and adaptive materials as IEP and 504 plan meetings were held and needs were identified for visual schedules or other supplies.

For sixth grade virtual special education teacher Alison Lotterhos, managing a group of a dozen students this year has meant attending each of their four core classes with them (history, language arts, math and science) and tracking each child's goals and paperwork as it relates to their in-school special services.

"For many of my students, virtual learning is going really well," she said. "There aren't hallway transitions and they have the same special educator—me—with them for all four of their core classes, so it's nice to have that consistency during these crazy times."

Lotterhos said she's been able to build really special relationships with each of her charges and

their families this year, even more so than in a normal school year.

"I could tell very early on this year that my students craved a schedule and time with their peers," she said. "Virtual learning provides a less stressful environment for students who are able to organize themselves and remain motivated. We definitely have students struggling with it, though ... is it stress from what's going on? Is it lack of motivation? Having a disability is a huge hurdle in and of itself, so adding all of these other factors just makes it so much harder for these students."

Overall, Lotterhos has been happy with the way virtual learning has been organized and feels that having a single "point person" for those students to reach out to has been key.

"I know what their expectations are with each class and I can communicate with my team on how we may need to adjust expectations with assignments," she said. "Having a strong virtual team who communicates regularly to adjust as needed has been a game-changer for this year and it's why I know these students have been successful overall."

As we look towards the future of education, Lotterhos thinks one of the biggest lessons to come out of 2020 is the impact of internet access on student success.

"The biggest challenge related to COVID-19 and virtual learning is realizing how unreliable our internet service here in Greene County is for many of our students," she said. "Fast, reliable internet can no longer be

viewed as an indulgent utility—it's a necessary way of life for us now and will likely continue to be."

Mother of four Leslie Napier says she set up a strong internet connection when she made the decision to run her business from home many years ago. That resource has proved invaluable with two children learning in the all-virtual format this year—Blake is in fifth grade at William Monroe Middle School and Kaitlyn is a senior in the high school. Her third child is homeschooled and the fourth is a freshman in college.

"Blake has autism and I'm lucky to get him to wear shoes, much less something over his face, so that was kind of not an option for him," said Napier of their decision to do virtual school this year. "And then because we were doing virtual for him, it just made sense to do virtual for Kaitlyn as well."

With the social distancing requirements in the school buildings this year, the fifth-graders have been housed in the middle school building. Napier said she felt that was one more significant change that would have been difficult for her son to manage if he attended in person.

"The reason that I worked from home to begin with is because of Blake—just me needing to be available for him on a regular basis, even when he was in school before COVID," Napier said. "I just don't sleep anymore—I work from five until 8:30 when he goes to school and then I get back to work at two o'clock when he's done with school. I do

have the luxury of having that flexibility."

Luckily, Blake has been incredibly successful with the virtual learning environment, thanks to the support of his mom and teachers.

"At the beginning, we had a little bit of a struggle because he doesn't like to be on camera—he never likes his photo taken or anything like that, so that's always kind of been a trigger for him," Napier said. "We had a meeting with his teacher and he is in the Zoom meetings, but he does not show his face unless he's talking. But he's on Zoom all day, like the rest of the students, and I am with him all day while he's on as well so I'm able to monitor everything. Everything with COVID obviously has been a big change, which makes it very difficult for a child with autism, so having him home and in his environment ... where he thrives has definitely been positive for him."

Napier has said the layout of the Canvas platform has been useful in providing a visual schedule for her son, who thrives on structure.

"Blake is a tech nerd, so he would much rather be on a computer than writing, and so being able to do all of his work on a computer has been really nice for him," she said. "The only time it becomes a struggle is if his teacher is out, because they're supposed to join with another class and Blake doesn't do well with that because it's a change. So he just doesn't get on Zoom those days and he just does his list of activities on Canvas ... any time

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we've had an issue with something, Blake's teacher and administrators have been great with setting up a meeting during office hours to discuss it and figure out a plan that works for all of us."

Napier wanted to thank the wonderful teachers who have really understood and worked with her son throughout his school year.

"I've always been super involved with everything with him, but I would say that I have really been heard with anything and everything that I've needed support with from the schools (this year) more so than even in the past," she said. "The transition from home to school has always been difficult for us anyway—I take Blake to school because he will fight and he will run ... but once he gets to school he is fine. I don't have high expectations for it being smooth when we do return because he's been home for so long."

One of the biggest things Napier said she has learned this year is that sometimes it is OK

to decide that a given assignment or class is just not going to work for her child.

"I am very much a believer that I am my children's parent, I know what's best for them and I set the rules, so if something's just not working for us or Blake's just having a bad day, I'm OK with just shutting the computer down and (deciding) we'll do this when we're having a better time," she said. "I think a lot of parents get super stressed over ... the way it's supposed to be. I'm OK with saying, we don't have to follow the rules today. We're just going to have a mental health day and we'll try again tomorrow."

The ability to have grace in accepting mental health limitations is one many across the world have learned during the COVID-19 pandemic, and Napier said she believes that losing one day of school here or there—whether for the child's needs or for an emergency asynchronous learning snow day—will not be a major setback in the long run.

"Every time we've had a snow day my kids have played out in the snow

until they're tired ... and then we get their work caught up," she said. "That's just kind of been the thing that's been the best for us."

When thinking about the future of education and plans to make up for "learning loss" after kids return to in person school (expected by many for this fall), it is important that the lessons learned by parents and teachers during this challenging year are carried forward.

"Parents are already anxious because of middle school, but throw in the challenges of a pandemic, working from home, keeping their children motivated and organized, as well as any other social-emotional hurdles like the loss of a job, struggling to put food on the table and staying healthy ... all of these issues are exacerbated by the pandemic," Lotterhos said. "We need to always keep that at the forefront when we discuss the 2020-21 school year. Kids aren't falling behind, in my opinion—we are all surviving the best we can and I can wholeheartedly tell you that I have seen some amazing progress."

VIEW FROM THE TEACHER'S DESK:

Virtual learning successful for some

BY KATHLEEN BORRELLI

Staff Writer

Editor's note: this is part four in an ongoing series about meeting the needs of students during the pandemic.

Since the nationwide shuttering of schools in March 2020 and the return to hybrid in-person and virtual learning in Greene County last September, many students have struggled with issues ranging from learning loss to social and emotional turmoil or even food and housing insecurity. Luckily, for some, virtual learning has been a story of success in a time of strife.

"Our family engagement efforts continue to improve and many staff cites a closer connection to parents and students than ever before," said Greene County Public Schools (GCPS) Assistant Superintendent Dr. Bryan Huber to the school board March 10. "Our collaboration has also improved across the school division as our staff has come together to improve and innovate in areas such as assessment, data collection and intervention services for students."

As the school district prepares for additional learning and social-emotional supports for a return to in-person learning for many students in the fall, it is also working to identify performance gaps and those who may benefit from additional summer school classes.

"In our data collection of student performance, we are



PHOTO COURTESY MEGAN DICKSON

Ruckersville Elementary School's only virtual fourth-grade class smiles during a recent school day on Zoom. Dickson, second from left on top row, shared her positive experiences being a fully-virtual teacher this year with the *Greene County Record*. This is her daily view of the "classroom."

noticing that upper elementary students have not experienced a significant decline in their academic performance as maybe traditionally (originally) expected," Huber said. "Particularly in reading and math, we're pleasantly surprised to see that those students in fourth and fifth grades, for the most part, are trending in the same direction for progress and achievement that they would have in prior years."

Although students will likely need additional time to readjust when they do return to the school buildings, the efforts of many teachers, administrators and staff members have helped to keep kids engaged and learning, according to Huber.

This was not a foregone conclusion when the plans for virtual learning first began last summer, according to school social worker Sarah Baran.

"Especially early on, what we found was that people just needed support getting organized and figuring out how to be a virtual student, how to be a virtual family, how to navigate the platforms—how to use what we gave them," she said earlier this year. "Sometimes they just needed the supplies, sometimes they needed to be walked through how to use Canvas or SeeSaw or when to log in, but the other things are sprinkled in there—the support with food or family trauma that they needed outreach for or referrals."

Nathanael Greene Elementary School Assistant Principal Regina Hissong also spoke to the hard work of school staff in rectifying issues that could have prevented virtual students from engaging with their lessons.

"We've delivered things like desks to families that (didn't) have a good learning

space for children ... we've delivered virtual learning kit supplies that have run out and needed replenished; we also quickly distribute components of the Chromebooks like chargers that get chewed by a dog—anything that would be a barrier to a student joining their class, we try to in a timely manner rectify that so that they can continue," she said.

For Ruckersville Elementary School's one and only virtual fourth-grade teacher, having returned from maternity leave just prior to the pandemic shutdown means she has not been inside a classroom full of students in more than a full year.

"I was definitely going through all the emotions of shocked and disappointed and missing familiarity in getting back to my students," said Megan Dickson

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of her initial reaction to the shutdown last March. “I think by the time summer came around and we were making the decision for fall, I personally was really happy that there was a virtual option and I was pushing for that because that’s how I felt safest returning at that point ... I wanted to support any families that had any anxiety about returning, too, and to give them an equal education, even if we’re doing it in a totally new, possibly challenging way.”

Dickson, who is in her eighth year of teaching (fifth in Greene County), is the sole fourth-grade teacher at RES in the virtual model with a class of 24 students. She says it’s been a challenge to reimagine every teaching tool she used in the past to be technology-based as well as giving up her classroom to in-person teachers and moving to a smaller office space within the school building.

“Student engagement was something I was really worried about; we’ve had to be really creative in getting everybody to participate and just stay fully involved in the lessons each and every day,” she said. “I didn’t think it would be vastly different than a normal school year where you’re adjusting your instruction to kids’ personalities and to kids’ learning abilities—there’s always some level of uncertainty at the beginning of a school year, period.”

Although she has had to adjust—as every teacher and student has done this year—to new technol-

ogy and with it, technical challenges—Dickson says she has honestly loved the experience thus far.

“It has blown me away in terms of the connections I’ve been able to make with my students outside of learning situations, because it just seems like even though there might be other Zoom screens up, we have so many options to be in a one-on-one setting as well,” she said. “There’s so much comfort in them showing off who they are as a person outside of school—I get to visit pet goats outside and go on tours of their yard, and things like that have just really, I think, made strong connections with the student and helped us see each other as not just a student and a teacher, but as people who are going through something—and learning how to do it together. The kids have been so resilient and they’ve shown so much perseverance in terms of problem-solving and working out tech issues on their own—and all of that for fourth grade, which I think is really impressive.”

In addition to getting to know her students on a more personal level due to having a “window” into their home lives, Dickson said shy students are able to blossom because they can use Zoom’s chat function rather than having to raise their hand in class to ask a question. Breakout rooms allow students to work in small groups without distractions from other groups meeting in the same crowded classroom, and individual students are not comparing their work to other classmates because while virtual, a student can only see his or her own work.

“Even in elementary, we have office hours,” she said. “I’ve had a surprising number of fourth-graders advocate for themselves and come to office hours to say, ‘I still need more practice with long division—can we work on this at this time,’ or, ‘I couldn’t turn my work in today because I didn’t understand these directions.’ So they know that there’s time built into their day for them to access help and for them to feel comfortable enough to ask for it, which I think is a really huge skill.”

The schedule for virtual learners is built in such a way that there is dedicated office hour time for students, makeup time for anyone who has been absent and parent office hours weekly in case a parent needs more time than can be addressed through phone or email.

“We’ve asked that every virtual learner who was signing up have a designated learning coach—basically someone who was there to help with tech issues and to oversee what was going on, and I think a really strong learning coach has been a huge key to the success of this program,” Dickson said. “We have lots of ways to communicate with each other—I get parents’ emails; we schedule Zooms; I text them; we have full, open communication because I don’t want anything to go unnoticed or be confusing for too long.”

According to Dickson, her students’ parents have been incredibly kind and understanding and willing to learn throughout the process.

“I think there’s a huge ‘we’re all in this together’ mentality between

the parents that I get to work with and we can just tell that we’re all on the same page and I’m so grateful for that,” she said. “I made sure the first thing I told them when this started was, ‘I 100% respect your decision and I’m going to try to make this the best virtual experience and make it positive and successful not just for your kid but for you, too, because this is a huge partnership that we’re going to do school from your house.’”

While planning out all of her virtual lessons in advance and holding office hours, Dickson also finds time to connect with her peers who are teaching the same grade in-person, to make sure they are all on the same track academically as well as providing opportunities for the students to connect.

“We’ve done several things to make sure that our virtual students and our in-person students still have shared experiences,” she said. “Our team planned a virtual field trip to Jamestown ... all of the in-person kids got on Zoom and all of the virtual kids got on, so as a grade level they were still able to connect with their peers and have a similar experience. We also did a whole grade-level-wide holiday celebration and that included the principal and the assistant principal and our counselor, so they get to still feel like they’re part of this community at RES even though they might not get to see these people in person.”

It hasn’t always been smooth sailing, of course.

“Technology issues happen sporadically, but

I think when it comes to internet access, communication is key,” Dickson said. “Parents know that if their child’s gotten kicked off of Zoom and they can’t get back on or they couldn’t finish an assignment because the bandwidth wasn’t strong enough, it’s all about us talking to each other and finding solutions.”

Hissong agreed that communication with families has been the most important factor in success for virtual families this year, and urges all parents who have concerns to contact the school so that their questions can be addressed.

“Some parents are more comfortable with texting and ... others rely on their email and that’s how they want to communicate,” she said. “And others just want you to pick up the phone and call them. But knowing each family’s best mode of communication has been the lifeline to every bit of the work that we’ve been doing because there’s not one answer that fits all families.”

While many school days do take place at home, Dickson says some kids have had better luck logging in from their parent’s office where the parent is able to get work done while supervising their child’s school day. One student logged in from another country while on a family trip and while quarantining after their return trip so they didn’t have to miss several weeks of school in order to go.

Looking ahead to the future, teachers and staff are hopeful that the lessons learned during the pandemic will translate

to better communication once students are back in the school buildings, whether that is this fall or a year from now.

“I think the parents who have been virtual have had a real window into a school day, which is something a lot of parents don’t get to see from start to finish,” Dickson said. “What is the workload like? How detailed is the lesson? What types of resources are we using? What ways can kids show their knowledge? They’re getting to see how their kids use time management skills and how their kids tackle different tasks. I think that hopefully going forward in future years, there’s definitely going to be more of a connection and understanding between parents and teachers in terms of what a day looks like and all that it entails.”

“We have gotten to know our families on a completely different level than we’ve ever experienced in the past, and it is really heartwarming and eye-opening and I feel so much more of a connection with so many of our families,” said Baran, who spends much of her time as the new School Community Liaison making home visits to virtual families in need of assistance this year.

Huber agreed.

“I think the most powerful thing through all of this has been the partnerships that we’ve been able to form with our families—true non-judgmental supportive in two direction partnerships,” he said. “When we are working with families, it’s very much a collab-

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orative effort to make decisions and to navigate tough situations with nothing but the success of their child of the forefront of the conversation, and if we can transfer that type of strong partnership into the future and build on those, that's how we will all be successful—it doesn't matter if it's a pandemic or we're

back into some sort of normalcy.”

In addition to parental support, Dickson thinks the advances in school technology can be a benefit in the future as well.

“I think that we just need to keep allowing kids—when we get fully back in person—to keep their discovery sense with the technology and the problem-solving skills, because it's been so clear to me how capable they are of this and how this is the

future,” she said. “Most likely their job's going to involve some sort of technology like this ... for teachers to redefine how we use technology so that it's a lesson in itself for kids, I think it's going to be really important.”

While planning for the fall 2021 semester is still underway, school administrators do anticipate a virtual option being available to anyone who wishes to continue at this time.

Virtual learning successful for some students, parents

BY KATHLEEN BORRELLI
Staff Writer

Editor's note: this is part five in an ongoing series about meeting the needs of students during the pandemic.

Throughout the pandemic, many students have struggled with isolation from friends and loved ones, with uncertainty in daily lives including attending school in hybrid or virtual learning environments and with fears over the many changes to daily life due to COVID-19. For some, however, virtual learning has been a story of success in a time of strife, and these are their stories.

Lisa Perego, instructional coach at William Monroe High School (WMHS) and parent

of two high school students, is grateful to have the choice of virtual learning for her own children. Her son, a senior at WMHS, takes two courses in person and the remainder virtual; her daughter is a sophomore and 100% virtual student.

"I could see the strains and benefits as a parent, educator and community member," Perego said. "I think any time we are in uncharted territory we get anxious about all of the things that could go wrong; for me, it was important to think of all the things that could go right in this situation. We were so very fortunate to have a choice as parents to the options we felt were best for our children."

While Perego acknowledges that some community members

struggle with less-than-optimal internet connectivity that could affect their ability to succeed as virtual learners, that was not the case in her own home. She is grateful that the flexibility of virtual education has allowed her kids the freedom to explore new hobbies.

"My children appreciate the flexibility of their day and creating their own schedules," she said. "It allows them to incorporate things that they truly love to do and explore areas they have never made time for before. My son has taken the time to begin learning guitar; he has built in time in his day to give himself breaks and practice ... it is a sense of stress relief and he



PHOTO COURTESY JOHN POWELL

Kenton Powell, a sixth-grader at William Monroe Middle School, logs in to school from his virtual learning space.

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has loved learning how to play. My daughter ... has taken up skateboarding during the pandemic and uses this as a means for physical activity—in the traditional PE classroom, this wouldn't have been possible.”

Peregoy said she has loved watching her children take charge of their own learning while utilizing free time to meet their needs as individuals, and that technological challenges were luckily few and far between.

For John Powell, father of two middle school students and one high-schooler, the decision to become virtual learners was left up to his teenagers. As both parents are essential workers, they needed to continue working outside the home during the peak of the pandemic.

“My wife works for UVA in healthcare and I am a sales rep for a food distributor ... so my kids' biggest scare about the pandemic was getting their parents sick—being around other kids that might be contagious and then they could bring it home to us,” Powell said. “So when the choices came out, we let our kids decide. We wanted them to be comfortable with whichever way they wanted to go ... all three chose—hands down—to go virtual, and it was mostly out of worry about their parents, which I thought was sweet.”

Powell's three kids are in sixth, eighth and ninth grades, so setting up for virtual learning meant a lot of different classes with a lot of different teachers.

“I remember my wife looking around and going, ‘OK, we've got to take the dining room and turn it into a classroom.’ She did a bunch of online searches and she said, ‘John, there are two plastic folding tables at Lowe's—their last two—we've got to go get them.’ And we ran and got them,” Powell said. “But when virtual school started,

we realized quickly that all of the Zoom meetings and having three siblings in the same room did not work.”

At first, Powell said he did not think the bedroom would be the best place for study as there were too many distractions. However, as with all of us during this pandemic, he got creative to find a solution to a new problem.

“I've set up different (WiFi) networks so each kid has their devices on their own network ... because I realized that without their parents lording over them it was real convenient to have their personal Chromebooks up watching movies while they were on a Zoom class,” he laughed.

Powell set up a school network just for the school devices and new printer, and a separate network for the television which would be turned off during the school day. With parameters outlined for each child, he can turn each network on or off—even remotely if needed—when the kids tell him they have finished their work for the day.

“It's still not perfect,” Powell said. “We still have a lot of—as my kids call it—glitches in the internet. There are times that they get bumped off classes ... when they've got to reload the Zoom meeting or reload the page. We pay extra for the one gigabyte of data transmission with Xfinity but it still doesn't work all the time; it's almost impossible to have three or four Zoom meetings going at one time.”

According to Powell, each family member has different limitations with technology and they have learned to rely on one another's strengths to set up videos or manage the remote printer in the house. With five family members utilizing the same internet connection, he said they also have to respect each other's internet needs—such as prohibiting streaming video calls or watching TV while the parents are in scout meetings. Powell does Boy Scouts

with his son, and his wife runs a Girl Scout troop.

For his eldest daughter, the ninth-grader, Powell said virtual learning has really helped her organizational skills flourish.

“She's determined and she has done a fantastic job of pacing herself, challenging herself—she's in the virtual (blue ridge) governor's school and she is applying for the early scholars program where you can get your two year associate's degree by the time you finish high school,” Powell said. “She is 100% committed—I mean, she'll do homework on Saturdays and Sundays if it needs to get done ... she's getting straight As, almost straight A-pluses, with hardly any oversight of my wife and I. I can't say the same thing for all three of my kids.”

With his sixth-grade son, however, the parents have had to take a more active role in helping to organize his study habits.

“I've written out a weekly schedule for each class and challenged him, trying to use it like an organizer and saying ... you've got to go through every class every day, read your emails, write down your assignments and then check them off when they're done,” he said. “We literally have to come home from work every day and then take an hour or two of our own time and sit down with them.”

Although it may be difficult at times, Powell said the willingness to spend that extra time helping their kids succeed is what has taught the entire family to respect each other more.

“My kids have to respect my job and my time when I need quiet and I need to respect their time,” he said. “I know more about sixth-grade math than I want to know right now but I've re-learned algebra myself and so has my wife. It's good and bad but we've gotten through it and you've got to be open to change.”

For Brian Mellott, another father of three in the middle



PHOTO COURTESY JOHN POWELL

Lindsey Powell, an eighth-grader at William Monroe Middle School, uses a balance ball for a seat while logging in for virtual school.

and high schools, high-speed internet access has also been a necessity to the success of his kids with virtual learning.

“When we heard about the plan for virtual school, we were happy that school was happening at all and confident that the teachers and school system would provide an excellent program for the kids,” he said. “Virtual classes have been around for years ... Beth and I both finished degrees taking virtual classes and we believe in the efficacy of delivering education that way. It is not, however, for everyone, and we need to recognize the maturity and support necessary for students to be successful with remote learning.”

At the start of the year, the Mellotts invested significant

time helping their three kids adjust to the technology, time management skills and emotional support needed for successful virtual learning.

“We had a few breakdowns, thinking that everything had to be done right away and that there was too much work,” Mellott said. “We also had a procrastinator who had to be kept on track, so there was a combination of the schools figuring things out and the kids adjusting to the situation. My role was to help teach them to adjust ... they have worked for it and we have spent a lot of time supporting them, but during that time they have had a lot of success and have learned a lot about themselves.”

Mellott says the kids' learn-

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ing spaces have evolved over the course of the year, starting out all together in the kitchen and living room and later moving to the basement and then to their individual rooms.

"My kids are all very different: Grace loves talking with her teachers; Sophie is a social butterfly; and Matthew is my introvert," he said. "With laptops, they've started doing class outside some. If one gets behind, we can move (them) closer to us to monitor a little more. The flexibility has been nice; basically as they showed success, they got more independence. Sophie uses her breaks to practice playing her ukulele, Grace is working on her Girl Scout Gold Award and Matthew uses his free time to work on Boy Scouts and sports. Doing that during the breaks in the school day frees up evenings for more quality family time."

Grace Mellott, a freshman at William Monroe High School, said she really likes that many of her teachers record their lessons so that she can go back and review the material later if she gets stuck.

"I tend to need more time to consider my questions and answers," she said. "In the classroom, it's easy to be put on the spot. But with virtual classes, I have the time to find the best way to word things. I also like that I can have more quiet time to focus on my work instead of always having distractions in the classroom; that helps to keep me on pace instead of losing track between class and home."

Sophie Mellott, a seventh-grader at William Monroe Middle School, believes her teachers have figured out what works best for students within the limits of the technology available.

"They are switching things up to give us the best possible ways to understand the material," she said. "I like that it's easy to keep track of your assignments because they are posted at the beginning of the week; it was always harder to keep track when we were in school. I (also) like the flexibility in my day. If I finish up early, I can practice my ukulele, grab a snack or play outside before my next class starts."

For Matthew Mellott, the sixth grader feels like he understands the lessons in a virtual format—but mostly he appreciates the flexibility in his day.

"I like that once you are



PHOTO COURTESY JOHN POWELL

Madeline Powell, a ninth-grader at William Monroe High School, prepares for the school day.

done with your work, you don't have to sit around waiting for everyone else to finish," he said. "You can go grab a snack, ride your bike or just play for a few minutes. I really like the classes that are more interactive and that have individual projects to work on."

As for the lessons learned from this year of virtual education, several parents felt that the technology would be an important takeaway once the kids are all back in the classroom.

"We have high-speed internet through Xfinity and I do think that internet connectivity is vital for virtual school success," Brian Mellott said. "In order for individuals in rural areas to get ahead, internet connectivity is of utmost importance—where that comes from is certainly up for debate."

Peregoy agreed.

"I support the broadband expansion in rural areas and this has been brought to the forefront of issues as we have adjusted our way of learning over the past year," she said. "While our goal is to go back to 'normal,' having access to reliable internet in this day and age is necessary for education to be equitable." She added that she hopes virtual learning will remain an option in the future for students who can thrive in this format.

Powell said he hopes kids carry forward lessons about team collaboration from their time spent working together virtually.

"I think kids are going to learn that in the world of work, there's not many jobs that are really one-on-one," he said. "I think this is going to teach kids

how to use something like Zoom to do group projects and to work collaboratively more and I think it's going to be easier for teachers to set that kind of expectation up."

Mellott agreed.

"Lessons in scheduling, communication, transparency and technology integration are all lessons that should be incorporated as they return to in-school instruction," he said. "I think virtual school should be offered in the future even if it means dedicating classroom space so that kids unable to stay home have a place to connect ... there are a number of kids who will see more success without the typical distractions of the classroom environment."

Powell also believes this year has been a real eye-opener for parents to be more keyed in to what their children are doing during the school day.

"I would hope that all parents are going to come out of this understanding how to get into PowerSchool and check grades, how to get into Canvas to communicate with teachers and go through school with their kids," he said. "There are too many kids that are on their own in life ... I hope that for some of those kids, that this has been a learning experience for the family and it's encouraged the family to get involved at the kid's school and their education."

Community rallies around students

BY KATHLEEN BORRELLI

Staff Writer

Editor's note: This is the sixth in a series about meeting the needs of students during the pandemic.

In 1728, a March 20 issue of the Boston Gazette advertised shorthand (handwriting) lessons that could be mailed to citizens who happened to live outside of the Boston area: "Any persons in the country desirous to learn this art, may by having the several lessons sent weekly to them, be as perfectly instructed as those that live in Boston." (<https://doi.org/10.1002/cc.169>) Institutionally-sponsored distance education was first cited in 1874 at Illinois Wesleyan University, and the term "distance education" was first used in a University of Wisconsin-Madison catalog for the 1892 school year. (www.uwex.edu/ics/design/disedu2.htm)

Nearly 300 years after the first recorded instance of "distance education," local school systems are still learning how to implement virtual learn-

ing for Greene County students due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and it hasn't all been smooth sailing. From the shuttering of schools and businesses in March 2020 through a full year of virtual and hybrid learning models, social distancing adaptations and countless Zoom meetings, issues of equitable internet access, food insecurity and mental health concerns have been at the forefront of educators' and decision-makers' minds.

Luckily, Greene County is a community where people help each other out in times of crisis.

Shortly after the shuttering of schools in March 2020, Greene County Public Schools began to offer free meals to families who had depended on the schools to provide breakfast and lunch for their children. This would later be paid for through federal CARES Act (COVID relief) funding. Pre-packaged healthy meals are still being given out weekly in a drive-thru format for any parents who request the assistance.



COURTESY PHOTO

JMU students (left to right) Emily Bloom, Harmony Kowiatek and Aleex Halsey cut out activities to add to the care packages for students.

As of press time, 153,712 total meals have been distributed to virtual Greene County students either through

curbside pickup or delivery in the past year, according

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to Director of Administrative Services Kyle Pursel. Adding in free meals provided to in-person students during that same time frame, the total free meals offered has been 275,229.

“When the pandemic started and schools closed, the (United States Department of Agriculture), authorized by the CARES Act, relaxed many restrictions and regulations that school food operations comply with in order to provide free meals for all children,” said Jennifer Williams, school nutrition director. “When school started in September, we were allowed to continue offering free meals to students learning both in person and virtually. Students can’t learn if they’re hungry, so it’s really important that these meals are available, especially during this time when the number of families in need has grown.”

Mental health is another challenge children face during the pandemic. Region Ten, established in 1969 to offer mental health, developmental disability and substance use services to Charlottesville and the surrounding counties, has seen an uptick in service requests in the past year, according to community relations coordinator and social worker Joanna Jennings.

“The biggest struggle for our children and teens has been the isolation from friends, family and significant people in their lives,” she said. “The need for being social has completely changed, and many students are more withdrawn than they were before March of last year. Many children have not been able to see their relatives during the holidays or at other events like birthdays and special occasions, and they feel that loss ... One year later, many of

our teens are still grieving the loss of so many pre-pandemic parts of their lives, and in general it can be hard for parents to know how to support their children through grief.”

Through existing relationships with school counselors and administrators, Region Ten local staff have been able to reach out to families when concerns about a specific student are identified.

“We know from research that the presence of a caring, supportive adult is one of the keys to building resilience ... (many) have lost connectedness to supports that have naturally been there for them,” Jennings said. “We expect that the upcoming one-year anniversary may bring up a lot of ‘big feelings’ for teens and are encouraging parents to listen and acknowledge their feelings.”

All Region Ten outpatient therapy services pivoted to a telehealth platform at the beginning of the pandemic, which Jennings said has proven to be more accessible for some teenagers.

“One protective factor throughout the pandemic is that teens have been able to connect through social media, call apps, FaceTime and other options and are very technologically savvy,” she said. “We also have been able to speak by phone with our teens who do not have access to adequate internet services.”

Another local resource that normally helps students is the Youth Development Council (YDC). Since 2014, YDC has been offering underserved children in Greene summer camp and after-school programs at no cost to the families. With comprehensive programming offering a wide range of educational, self-improvement and character-building activities, YDC concentrates on maintaining a low staff-to-student ration to give these children meaning-

ful long-lasting relationships that instill trust and enhance individual development.

Prior to the pandemic, YDC kids met at Nathanael Greene Elementary school (NGES) and William Monroe Middle School twice weekly. Ruckersville Elementary School students could also take the bus to NGES to participate, and they would be provided free healthy snacks as well as the various activities. In partnership with James Madison University (JMU)’s occupational therapy program, JMU students would visit once a week to provide behavioral regulation activities and YDC even took kids on field trips to do community service work or even out to dinner occasionally.

“Right now, we’re still maintaining our relationship with 50 students and their families ... through phone conversation, text and email,” Alley said. “Through these conversations with the families, we’ve been able to understand the needs of our YDC families during the pandemic and hopefully be able to assist them. Especially at the beginning of the pandemic, everybody was looking for hand wipes and toilet paper ... so we were able to assist some of our families with toiletries, food—we’ve even provided birthday and Christmas presents.”

Since no after-school programming is being held at the elementary and middle schools this year due to COVID protocols, Alley said his team has focused on maintaining relationships with their existing students and families but look forward to expanding once they are back in school once more.

“We are providing boxes—we call them after-school boxes—filled with the STEM projects ... arts and crafts, recipes and outdoor activities ... just like the ones that we offer in the after-school

program,” Alley said. “And the boxes contain all the materials, the ingredients and instructions needed for each activity, so Mom and Dad don’t have to go pick up any kind of materials.”

Each month, YDC staff and volunteers have assembled and delivered boxes to all of the 50 students on their roster. With six to eight activities in each box along with healthy snacks and recipes, this semester they’ve also begun to include books per reading level for each student in the home. The March box included a yoga mat for each child and images of Star Wars characters performing various stretches and yoga poses. A past activity used superheroes to talk to kids about regulating emotions, such as the Incredible Hulk to demonstrate managing anger or Wonder Woman talking about truth and honesty.

“JMU students are providing two activities as well so that will be a little material and instruction, but they will also tell why they’re doing the activity, you know—will it help them with their stress level, their anxiety, if they’re sad or what do you do if you get upset—things like that,” Alley said. “We’re also trying to do some virtual art, so right now we’re offering drum lessons to our kids and so we’ll drop off a drum pad and drum sticks.”

This spring, YDC is also piloting a mentoring program where it pairs volunteers from the high school with kids who may need someone to talk to. The mentoring is also all-virtual, of course.

“Many of our families were worried about their kids having someone to confide in,” Alley said. “Many of our families that we work with are single-parent homes—I would say at least 75%—and so one of the requests that we’ve received from some of

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our families is something like a big sister/big brother-type program. We have some juniors and seniors from the high school that have volunteered with YDC before ... that are working with 10 of our YDC students just communicating through text and emails and FaceTime. It can be a lonely time for some of our students and this has really had some positive feedback from some families.”

Alley is associate pastor for Spring Hill Baptist Church and says the YDC volunteers have had fantastic support from many area churches as well as Feeding Greene Inc. and the Region Ten counseling staff.

“Every once in a while we’ll drop off a box and you get to see them—you’ll get to see mom or the kids come out and grab the box and you can say hello to them and it’s just kind of like a reunion,” Alley said. “As you can tell, I really miss it, so I’ll be glad when we can hopefully meet again and get back together.”

In the past, YDC kids have helped pack groceries for delivery at Feeding Greene. On July 2, 2020, six adult leaders and eight YDC kids helped Feeding Greene tie-dye more than 1,000 masks to hand out to families in the community.

“We had been handing out many white cloth masks to families but with the hot summer months I just thought they’d get so stained with use and I was already in good supply of dyes and solutions from many years of tie-dying T-shirts,” said Feeding

Greene Director Rhonda Oliver. “The most memorable moment was when the kids first arrived and seeing their excitement of just seeing their friends again. They made comments about each other and about how they had changed—like their hair or how tall they had gotten. The reality of these kids sheltering at home and not seeing their friends for so long never hit me until that moment.”

In addition to YDC, Oliver says the food pantry has received support from county extension agent Kathy Alstat’s 4-H Club members to box food, unload trucks and help clean the pantry each month.

“We’ve had a lot of help from students loading cars on Tuesdays and Thursdays and helping to serve families on Saturdays,” Oliver said. “The families we serve have made comments that they love seeing the youth out there helping.”

According to Oliver, Feeding Greene saw a 96% increase in the number of individuals served in 2020 with the biggest increase being in children age 17 and under (104% increase) and an 85% increase in the number of visits to the pantry over past years. Various federal funding sources have helped the pantry keep up with demand, and the move to the new location on Main Street in Stanardsville helped with the need for more space to store food items.

“The average household size doubled when we started serving more families with children home from school,” Oliver said. “We began providing special bags of food to families with children and we continue to offer

these to families at each visit. The need is not going away anytime soon.”

The food bank has coordinated efforts with the local schools to try to get food to families with children throughout the pandemic and Oliver says she has continued to be impressed by the neighborhood response.

“Greene County citizens have really stepped up to help meet the needs of the families in our community,” she said. “There was a real effort by local agencies, other non-profits and clubs, churches, businesses, individuals and entire families to come together to offer what they could to help us get food to families. We absolutely witnessed the best in mankind during the pandemic and we should all feel very blessed to be a community that cares for one another. It’s easy to get tired and worn out from the heavy workload and long hours, but we are always mindful that working together, perseverance and building new relationships are crucial if we’re going to make an impact in our community.”

For students or parents in need of mental health support, visit regionten.org/locations/greene-counseling-center.

For information about Youth Development Council or to make a donation to support the nonprofit, visit greeneyouth.org.

Feeding Greene is in need of donations to help renovate their new building to add a walk-in freezer and cooler. For more information, visit feeding-greeneinc.org.