A school year abruptly interrupted, and slowly salvaged

By Christopher Connell
Piedmont Journalism Foundation

It was Friday afternoon March 13, the end of the third quarter for Fauquier County schools, and a half day for students. M.M. Pierce Elementary School kindergarten teacher Lauren Brill was still there working mid-afternoon when the principal made the announcement: Gov. Ralph Northam has just closed schools for two weeks because of the novel coronavirus.

“I started bawling my eyes out. I was beside myself,” said Brill, who had realized this was a possibility as the pandemic spread across the country, but didn’t anticipate the suddenness. “You won’t get to experience anything more with your kids for who knows how long.”

Jerry Hull, a veteran fifth-grade science and social studies teacher at Brumfield Elementary, said, “That Friday we didn’t realize that was going to be the last day we ever taught those kids.” Ten days later, the governor closed schools for the rest of the academic year, setting off a statewide scramble to figure out how to make the best of a bad situation and help children and teens keep learning while stuck at home.

Now, in week eight of the closure, teachers, parents and students are becoming accustomed to, if not entirely comfortable with, the world of education at a distance, where almost nothing is graded, no new material is introduced and teachers check in on students by email, phone or over the website Blackboard, and hold virtual class meetings and “office hours” once or twice a week.

Parents, involuntary home-schoolers, do their best to keep children on track, helping them with no friends, no speeches, no crowds. Some students have expressed regret that in addition to losing half of their senior year, they are also being denied a traditional graduation ceremony.

Will Hunter, a senior at Kettle Run High School, wrote in a letter to the Fauquier Times, “While we, as a class, recognize the exceedingly difficult situation that the administration is in due to the virus, the present plan feels more like a photo-op than a graduation ceremony.

“The current arrangement would have individual, isolated appointments take place over a four-day period from May 18 to 22, on each school’s campus. This decision was made without consulting the graduating students [at Kettle Run], as neither the senior class president, nor the student body president were aware of plans being made.”

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Jocelyn Hammond, 11, a sixth-grader at Warrenton Middle School, checks on the garden behind her home in Warrenton; the garden is one of several family projects started after schools closed in mid-March.

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this,” said Brill, who’s home with her own 6-year-old kindergartner, Scarlett. “We do a lot of playing, fun activities, trying to make it engaging. Kids are resilient, but I’m seeing how hard it is for them to be home, away from friends and not in a school routine.”

Fauquier distributed Chromebooks to families that don’t have computers and formulated a Continuity of Learning Plan for the final weeks before school ends May 29, with the aim of preparing students to move on to the next grade in the fall. “All learning options will be a review of previously taught concepts and skills and exposure only to any ‘big ideas’ that will be necessary … to be successful in next year’s classes,” it said.

What they aimed for, Superintendent of Schools David Jeff said, was an approach “that’s fairest to the largest number of people. … We think we’re in a good place as far as delivering meaningful instruction to kids.”

They’ve had to overcome obstacles that predate the pandemic and likely will outlast it. Hundreds of Fauquier families have little or no access in their homes to the internet and some have no computer or device for their children to use anyway.

In addition to the Wi-Fi available in school parking lots, the county set up 10 mobile hotspots where people could take their children to get emails and download other materials. The adults, including some teachers, rely on hotspots, too.

Hull, a children’s song writer and performer, posts YouTube videos of science experiments he performs in his kitchen with everyday materials, including a goo called oobleck made from simple cornstarch and water that pours like a liquid but turns solid when compressed. (This experiment in so-called non-Newtonian fluids is a science teacher’s favorite.) His three kids, Julian, 6, Liam, 9, and Gabriel, 14, are his assistants. The hirsute Hull already had his own “Jerry Hull School Songs and Science” channel on YouTube.

“I can be happy if my students watch them once,” said Hull, who’s taught for 20 years, but his goal is for people to share the links widely so they reach anyone trying to home-school their kids and work in a little science.”

His wife Kristy is a teacher, too. “We have a full range of abilities in our own family,” Hull said. Gabri- nel is non-verbal. His special education teacher calls every week; she share the links widely so they reach everyone trying to home-school their kids and work in a little science.”

“During the afternoon I pretty much had to tell the kids, whatever they could get done, great. On average it would be 1.5 to two hours of schoolwork a day — obviously nowhere near the amount of time they would spend in class, but do what you can,” said Brady.

Parents Mike and Carrie Hammond both are home working full-time: he’s in cybersecurity and she’s in health care IT — sharing a home office while also guiding the schoolwork of daughters Jocelyn, 11, a sixth-grader, and Carly, 14, an eighth-grader.

“It’s been interesting,” said Mike, who narrowly lost a race for the Fauquier School Board last year. “We’re both helping with the schoolwork, making sure the kids are getting on their computers, finding and doing assignments that come in from their teachers. We have them working between 10 and noon.”

In addition, Jocelyn, a travel soccer player, has virtual team meetings and practices four times a week, and Carly keeps up her ballet lessons over the internet.

“Between those and school, my kids are as busy as they ever were,” he said. Instead of “driving them around” and getting to practice, games and shows, now we’re just like, “Let’s get the kids on the Zoom, make sure they have a room, a computer. Things are going really smoothly for us. We’re fortunate. It’s not the same for everybody.”

Carly was to have been one of the stepisters in her ballet troupe’s spring performance of “Cinderella,” which, of course, got canceled. She enters Kettle Run High School in the fall. Hammond said, “She’s not worried about being ready academically. Her big thing is missing the rites of passage from eighth grade, the dances, activities, the yearbook, leaving friends. That’s hit her harder.”

Matt Walker, a social studies teacher at Taylor Middle School, also thinks students will not be hurt by missing much of the fourth quarter.

“I don’t think it will be a deficit. A lot of students are really engaging with the work, which is really great. They’re resilient. They come back from every summer ready to jump back in,” said Walker, whose wife is due to have their second child in three weeks.

Walker, who left a career in the nonprofit world to become a teacher three years ago, said, “As educators

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we put more emphasis now on developing critical-thinking abilities. Those are things that aren’t forgotten.”

Even in cases involving a jury trial, Ruzic said that some of his clients have spent more time in jail waiting for their case to be heard than they otherwise would. “When cases are delayed, people suffer,” he said, and noted that people awaiting a hearing have not been convicted of a crime and are presumed innocent until proven guilty.

During the pandemic, he said, “it is much harder to think about the people who are incarcerated … they are suffering the most.”

He said that courts in the past have been reluctant to allow cases to be heard over video conferencing or phone.

“For good reason,” he said – but that, in his view, the decision to hear cases remotely during the pandemic has been a benefit in some instances.

However, he added that because the clients represent limited financial resources, they often lack the devices and internet access to participate remotely in that way. “They frequently don’t have the resources to set up video conferencing,” he said.

Marie Washington, a Warrenton attorney who regularly represents clients in Fauquier County, said that many of her cases have been delayed. However, she said, urgent cases have been heard in a timely manner, usually over video conferencing or phone.

“It’s been really cool to see everyone working together,” Washington said, “the commonwealth’s attorney has been very good.”

The prohibition on jury trials does mean, she said, that some jury trials throughout the state will be delayed. “You really can’t get speedy justice right now,” she said, in regard to cases in which a client has a right to a trial by jury.

Fauquier County Circuit Court Chief Deputy Clerk Helen Zaleski declined to comment on the extension of the judicial emergency. “We refer you to that order setting out the court’s temporary procedures during this declaration of judicial emergency,” she said.

The commonwealth’s attorney for Fauquier County, Scott Hook, did not respond to a request for comment.

Supervisors to address pandemic issues at May 14 board meeting

By Cy Farrelle TIMES STAFF WRITER

A work session and regular meeting of the Fauquier County Board of Supervisors will take place on Thursday, May 14, at the Warren Green Building in Warrenton. The work session will begin at noon and the regular meeting will start at 6:30 p.m.

At the 6:30 p.m. regular meeting a public hearing will be held on a proposed ordinance that seeks to address the continuity of county government during the pandemic.

The ordinance would, among other things, provide a succession plan for the heads of county departments in the event they are incapacitated, limit some government functions that are deemed “non-essential,” temporarily suspend some administrative procedures and create a waiver process for certain land-use deadlines.

Some items on the consent agenda for the regular meeting include a proposal to allocate $75,000 from a contingency reserve fund for expenses related to COVID-19, a contribution of $25,000 to the micro-loan emergency fund, a resolution to expand the Opal Service District and a resolution to apply for a federal grant for fire and emergency services.

During the afternoon work session supervisors will, among other items, hear an update from county staff about the FY 2020 and FY 2021 budgets and present Virginia Department of Health presentation regarding the public health crisis.

As with previous county meetings held during the ongoing pandemic, members of the public will not be permitted in the meeting room in accordance with the state-wide limitations on public gatherings of more than 10 people.

Public comments for a public hearing or citizens’ time may be submitted in four ways: by mail; by email prior to the meeting at BOS.PublicComment@fauquiercounty.gov; by registering to speak over videoconference at http://BOSVirtualMeeting.fauquiercounty.gov or by closed circuit television from a separate room in the Warren Green Building.

The meetings will be livestreamed and broadcast on Com cast Government Channel 23, WVAQ 91.7FM. Attendance and participation in public meetings can be found on the Board of Supervisors website at https://www.fauquiercounty.gov/government/boards-committees/board-of-supervisors.

The Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) is accepting comments regarding proposed limited access control changes for U.S. 29 just south of Route 687 (Opal Road) in connection with the redevelopment of commercial parcels on the southwest corner of that intersection. The change will create a break in the limited access on U.S. 29 for a new entrance, eliminate existing entrances to one parcel from U.S. 29 and from Route 687, extend limited access along Route 687 to Route 868 (Avatar Way), and will improve safety at that intersection.

Members of the public who wish more information about the proposed limited access control change should contact Joseph Webb, Assistant Resident Engineer for Land Use at VDOT’s Warrenton Residency, by phone at (540) 347-6445, or email joewebb@vdot.virginia.gov.

VDOT invites public comments about the proposed limited access control change. Comments must be sent to Joseph Webb, Project Manager, VDOT Warrenton Residency, 457 East Shirley Avenue, Warrenton, VA 20186; or email joewebb@vdot.virginia.gov, on or before June 5, 2020. Please reference “U.S. 29 Opal LACC Request” in the subject line.

VDOT ensures nondiscrimination and equal employment in all programs and activities in accordance with Title VI and Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. If you need special assistance for persons with disabilities or limited English proficiency, please contact the project manager listed above.