

Summer school 2020 included more than 1,000 students

Remote teaching techniques informed by lessons learned since March

By Angela Roberts
SPECIAL TO THE FAUQUIER TIMES

When Fauquier County Public Schools opened up summer school registration to all students a few weeks ago, more than 1,100 middle and high school students signed up.

Normally, summer school is only available to middle- and high-schoolers who need to retake a course in order to graduate. The usual number of summer school students is about 35.

“Everybody was very worried about students not having been in school since March,” said Blaire Conner, assistant principal of summer school. “It’s not that our students are behind ... but it’s that we wanted them to have the opportunity to continue learning in this current unique situation [caused by COVID-19].” Summer school 2020 started on July 6 and will end July 23.

To meet the demand for the summer program, the county hired 81 staff members instead of the four or so it typically brings on. To accommodate students with no or poor internet access, the district gave out 300 electronic devices and 200 internet hotspots so students could connect to the internet; those numbers were enough to serve every student who requested the equipment, said Conner.

School buses with hotspots continue to be parked throughout the county as well, and Hodge says the bandwidth of Wi-Fi at schools has been expanded so that students can access the internet from their parking lots.

The federal CARES Act, enacted to stimulate an economy brutalized by the coronavirus pandemic, has helped the school district cover the cost of the hiring blitz, as well as the hotspot devices.

Learning how to teach remotely

All instruction this summer is happening remotely for the first time. The result is a large, living laboratory for teachers and administrators to discover what works and what doesn’t as they finalize logistics for the coming school year.

Allyson Martin’s kindergarten class is one such laboratory, with a jam-packed hour of education four days a week via computer. Since the



Teacher Allyson Martin works with kindergarteners remotely.

COURTESY PHOTO

second week of July, the class has talked about shapes and patterns and learned the spelling of different words, with lessons on manners and patience thrown in, too.

“They’re so cute to see on the screen,” said Martin, who teaches second grade at James G. Brumfield Elementary School in Warrenton. “Oh my gosh, it makes my teacher heart so happy.”

Summer school has been more rigorous than the instruction that happened virtually from March through May, Martin said. She expects her first-graders and kindergarteners to pay attention. She’s also introducing concepts that may be new to them.

When schools went online in the spring, the school district made assignments and expectations flexible to avoid adding more stress to the already disrupted lives of families. It distributed “choice boards” to families — a tic-tac-toe-like listing of educational activities to keep students busy. Martin said she taught a few “mini lessons” via video, but she mainly concentrated on reviewing basic concepts.

Brittany Hundley, who will be teaching third grade at Greenville Elementary School in Nokesville in the fall, agreed that the summer school experience is more demanding.

She and another Greenville teacher are sharing responsibility for a group of 85 students between kindergarten and fifth grade who are able to work more independently than Martin’s students. Hundley and her colleague mainly interact with their students over Google Classrooms rather than over video chat.

“It’s been really, really cool to see what the kids are creating and how they’re taking ownership and they’re learning and showcasing their strengths,” she said.

Hundley also helped create the curriculum for this year’s summer school program. Starting in the spring, a committee composed of teachers and

administrators planned how the virtual program should be run, incorporating lessons learned from what didn’t work online between March and May.

For instance, summer school principal Michael Hodge said the biggest concern the school system heard from families was that there was too much variation in the way lessons were taught across the district. During summer school, he said, the school district has been trying to establish a common way of teaching across all grades.

Summer school teachers have also used their virtual teaching experience from the spring to make improvements, said Hodge, assistant principal for Southeastern Alternative School in Midland.

“Having that experience in their back pocket, and using that experience — along with feedback that they had been given at their own schools and by their own students — helped them to [decide] ... how they would set up their virtual learning experience during the summertime,” he said.

Last week, the Fauquier County School Board approved a plan for the fall that will allow students to attend school in person two days per week and learn from home the other three, but Martin pointed out that much of the future remains unknown. What if there’s another surge of the coronavirus? What if Virginia’s governor shuts down schools again?

If this happens, Martin says her experience teaching summer school has prepared her to teach her students remotely.

“If a kindergartner or first-grader can sit for an hour, I know my second-graders can sit for an hour,” she said. “I can still do things I did in the regular classroom with them over the computer.”

At last week’s meeting, school Superintendent David Jeck said any schoolwork assigned on days students aren’t in the classroom, they will be able to be complete “with or without technology support” — a recognition of the spotty nature of internet access in the county.

Martin has learned to handle the county’s glitchy internet. When one of her student’s video connection would drop, Martin and her class just waited for the student to come back online.

Martin promised parents she will do whatever it takes to help her students, even if that means delivering lessons by phone.

“I’m not gonna leave a kid who doesn’t have access out just because they’re not there,” she said. “I will go beyond for any of my kids — no matter what.”

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costly water and wastewater expansions to accommodate a 2.3% annual growth rate. The mismatch suggests an intention to recruit new populations from surrounding jurisdictions to achieve a growth rate well above the town’s projected growth.

Furthermore, rather than do the difficult work of recycling failed strip mall development along U.S. 29, the plan proposes a bypass, through conserved land, around the western side of Warrenton by building out the Timber Fence Parkway and acquiring land for a new “Southern Parkway” from Va. 211 down to U.S. 29. The town seems to want residential growth without regard to the consequences in costs for services. And, if its ambitious growth goals are not realized, after investing in water and

wastewater expansions and a new bypass, existing taxpayers will be burdened with those costs.

These are some of the bigger issues in the plan that deserve thoughtful and transparent discussion.

The Piedmont Environmental Council calls on the town to slow down this process and consider that this major planning decision is being made during a pandemic. Times like these require the town to actively pursue public input, which takes additional time and effort. Doing so will not only increase community buy-in, but will also ensure the plan truly reflects the community’s desires. The plan will be improved through the process, and Warrenton will be better for it.

JULIE BOLTHOUSE

*Piedmont Environmental Council
Warrenton*

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anxieties are our obligations to the children -- who are watching us and looking to their elders for reassurance.

We know that many children who don’t go to school and learn in a classroom will suffer intellectual, physical and emotional hardship. Online learning doesn’t work with young children. They need in-person interaction with their teachers and their classmates. If this doesn’t occur, they will be denied an opportunity to grow and fulfill their God-given potential.

I am grateful for the devotion and care provided to all of us in this time by our health professionals, first responders and law enforcement officers. I am also so very grateful to the many brave essential workers who are transporting food and other necessities and stocking and staffing our grocery stores and pharmacies. Teachers should also be considered essential workers. I hope they will find a way to continue our children’s education, full time and in person.

JOAN CATON ANTHONY

Warrenton

Letters to the Editor

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WRITE: Letters to the Editor
41 Culpeper Street
Warrenton, VA 20188

FAX: Editor 540-349-8676
EMAIL: news@fauquier.com

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