

St. Andrew's College resumes school year ? entirely online

The physical campus might be shut down, but it is full steam ahead for St. Andrew's College students who are now studying online from all over the world.

The Aurora-based independent school, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, has now gone fully virtual in a commitment to keep their semester ? and their school ? on track for the rest of the school year.

Last week was the first in which the venerable institution was able to go fully online. It was a process they began just before March Break (which, for them, began a week earlier than most schools across Ontario) when the pandemic was expected to be around for just a few weeks.

?These are not ideal conditions, we understand that, but we're making the most of it, I sincerely believe that,? says Head of School Kevin McHenry. ?Before March Break, we had an assembly [where] we mentioned to our students to take everything academically they need to work from home online. This was in the first week of March and it really didn't look like we were going to be online. Thankfully, we made the statement and communicated it to our parents, so, for the most part, the boys have been ready to go.?

Laying the groundwork for 650 students to connect to St. Andrew's from all parts of the world was a logistical challenge for their IT department, but most of the bugs were worked out by March 25.

?You need a lot of support for this and our first goal was to solidify and get the academic program going in the best way possible,? says Mr. McHenry. ?We have, quite frankly, been blown away by the feedback we have received from our students, our parents, our alumni.?

Integral to the planning process and making sure the curriculum could be fully adapted to online learning is Dr. Michael Paluch, leader of SAC's academic program. One of the first steps was making sure students had all the tools they needed to make this possible and identify any possible gaps in that regard.

Once those challenges were solved, focus was squarely on making sure students had the tools they needed to reach the next step of their academic journey. For Grade 12 students on the cusp of graduating, it was a matter of making sure they would have the credits they needed to follow their chosen post-secondary path. For younger students, it was a matter of making sure they had a strong base for the next grade.

?We know there are some things we just can't do online, but our teachers have been really innovative,? says Dr. Paluch, noting they have also developed online programs where phys-ed can continue in the virtual universe. ?One shift is we're using something called an Exit Ticket approach,

which means that at the end of each class, because we're following our schedule, kids who are all over the world might not be able to attend that class face-to-face so, at the end of the day, the student engaging with the material that has been posted to that class is required to produce some kind of exit ticket, some kind of activity that allows us to respond to them. There is an eternal feedback loop that is going on. In this context, it is happening both through dialogue and Zoom, but there is a feedback loop happening where teachers are responding after each class to something that a student did. It's a way to make sure you're always engaged with the kids.?

In developing the program, SAC was cognizant that students, teachers, staff and parents might be overwhelmed tackling a new way of learning in the middle of a global situation that can leave many feeling overloaded, says Mr. McHenry, noting they also took the mental health side of things into the equation.

Wellness ? mental and physical ? has been integral in the development of the program, leaving space for mindfulness exercises, including yoga.

So far, the feedback has been nothing but positive.

?Online learning has been emerging but it has never really taken hold,? says Dr. Paluch. ?This is the first time in the world where online learning is becoming quite common. I think a lot of our teachers are operating in the spirit of, ?Imagine what the opportunities will be once this crisis is over,? how we can maybe leverage some of the learning that we're experiencing here and just kind of improve our practice in general. As much as this is a challenge, it is also a really big opportunity. We're learning a lot in a short time and I think it is going to make us stronger and education in general is going to be stronger, and we will have a better sense of what the future looks like in terms of online learning.?

Adds Mr. McHenry: ?Worldwide, there are going to be a lot of positives that come from this. The world is maybe going to be a slower place, a more grateful place, and I think on the education landscape, you're going to find that people are going to understand the benefits of online learning. There is nothing like face to face, and that is the core of what we should be all about, but the advantages of having this experience, both students, teachers, staff, parents, alum, we're figuring out a number of things that need to be figured out and I think that is a positive.?

By Brock Weir