



Lower School Forum Summary

Tuesday, November 10, 2020
Zoom Webinar

Theme: Engaging and Adapting in the 2020-2021 School Year

Welcome and Opening Remarks

PCW President Frazier Schulman opened the event, welcoming attendees. Suzanna Kang, PCW Board Member, introduced the program panelists:

- ❖ **Jenifer Congdon, Head of Lower School, St. Patrick's Episcopal Day School**
- ❖ **Mike Risen, Head of Lower School, Norwood School**
- ❖ **Jalene Spain Thomas, Lower School Director, St. Stephen's and St. Agnes School**

Jenifer Congdon, Head of Lower School, St. Patrick's Episcopal Day School

- Students are not experiencing many of the rhythms and typical patterns of a normal year; simple acts are no longer simple in a COVID environment.
- Lisa Damour, psychologist and author, notes that trauma research repeatedly emphasizes that a child who had at least one caring adult while going through a life-altering event fared much better.
- Children would further benefit from strong communities like schools that have elements of belonging and sense of purpose. Schools supply a strong support structure with routines for students that serve as metaphorical guard rails. By keeping structure the same in a remote or in-person setting makes students feel comfortable to take academic risks.
- Creating a sense of belonging and purpose, providing the structure and routine they crave, and making the celebratory moments – big and small – that shape our calendars and lives will not only help our children through this time but allow them to thrive.

Mike Risen, Head of Lower School, Norwood School

- Children are surprisingly resilient and adapt well.

- However, children may not understand or have the words for the anxiety, nervousness, uncertainty they may feel. But there are opportunities for all of us to develop flexibility, creativity, growth mindset, and patience.
- Lower schools are using the COVID environment to explore new ways to play at school. The environment dictates finding new forms of play without touching each other and keeping distance. The playground structures are not available, so the current situation allows for creativity and imagination to think differently about recess. Children create their own play.
- Pioneering is a big term at Norwood and means starting something to make something better for yourself and others. It is important that teachers and parents model the growth mindset in how we are responding to the challenges of COVID.
- COVID provides the opportunity to teach how to set routines and expectations but manage the disruptions; learning skills in flexibility and elasticity to accept change.
- Embracing personal responsibility through the new tasks to accomplish, e.g., handwashing, social distancing, and materials going back and forth, adds additional learning and growth experiences.

Jalene Spain Thomas, Lower School Director, St. Stephen's and St. Agnes School

- St. Stephen's and St. Agnes School created pandemic partnerships with parents and used community time to acknowledge family frustrations and provide for meaningful connections between the school and parents.
- Top tips that helped the school
 - acknowledge that parents are now serving as co-teachers;
 - supply the students and parents with devices, technical support, and clear direction to connect each day;
 - explain the "why" to the parents;
 - provide guidance about home learning workspace for the student and screen time and academic balance suggestions; and
 - communicate clear roles and responsibilities; streamline and clarify the information flow so there isn't information coming from multiple sources.
- Fantastic fails – discovered during the spring remote learning that specials could not be easily woven into the process.
- Leveraged surveys to find out how people were doing and what they might need which allowed for deep engagement and thoughtful care to the processes.
- Created weekly storytime and community meetings.
- A central component to the overall success was teacher support and keeping the teachers spirits high.

A Question and Answer session followed the presentations. Highlights included:

- Communications have had to change to strengthen lines of communication with parents and provide visuals.
- Holistically, benchmarks/standards have not changed significantly, but may need to measure them in different ways. The children are meeting their academic benchmarks in general; however, be aware if your child is having problems.