

the **CASS** CONNECTION

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# Looking Back, Moving Forward:

SUCCESS AND OPPORTUNITY THROUGH CHALLENGE



# Unexpected Benefits in Unprecedented Times



Bringing passion into the classroom in the time of COVID-19. Photos courtesy of Teresa Di Ninno.



Taquinos from Venezuela. Good food is good for the soul!

While many of us hoped for a post-COVID-19 return to at least a near-normal environment in September, we prepared for all contingencies and new planning gave rise to shifts in program delivery. Unfortunately, September's new regiment of changing restrictions and shifts between at-school and at-home have had an undeniable impact. Cohorting in a face-to-face environment has forced serious alterations to modes of delivery in programs where previously student movement was key, literacy and numeracy in particular.

Homogenous cross-grade grouping and seamless shifts between groupings were eliminated. Our student-choice projects had to be rebranded, reducing student choice.

*By Teresa Di Ninno, CAPE Public Charter School*

Frequent hand washing and sanitizing eroded the teaching time and diminished the ability to facilitate groups in shared spaces. The more we attempted to address safety concerns, the more we diminished those effective practices that were central to programming for all of our students, but especially for those students that needed greater flexibility.

Our literacy and numeracy programs were designed to provide targeted supports to homogenous groups of below-grade-level students. Multi-age groups were structured based on standardized assessments and teacher observations. Membership in these groups was fluid, so that as students grew to meet grade expectations, they were able to transition from one environment to another. Three tiers of supports facilitated response to different levels of students needs.

In an attempt to counteract all that the literacy program would be losing, we assigned literacy instruction to specialist teachers. This

resulted in an improved selection of high-yield strategies in the classroom, greater collaboration, and the sharing of methods and resources that require a higher level of expertise. We also narrowed the role for each member of the literacy team, increasing their skillsets and understanding of their assigned students.

The numeracy program, although it parallels the literacy program, offered greater challenges. Firstly, the relative lack of specialist teachers and teacher efficacy with mathematics processes and instruction amplified the challenges in providing multiple levels of instruction within diverse groups. With greater group diversity came the need for a wider variety of approaches. The need for an effective assessment tool that provides meaningful data was painfully evident, and it forced the deficits in the program to become starkly apparent. As result, we are engaging in a complete review of the numeracy program. The numeracy team is being strengthened to better support the teachers and the students. We are developing

a written math assessment tool which we hope to pilot and have ready for the 2021-22 school year. We are also embarking on a series of collaborative efforts with post-secondary expertise to increase staff capacity and confidence in the teaching of numeracy.

Partnerships with the community, an integral part of our program, are conducive to student engagement. They create a sense of belonging and of community, foster the development of personal skills, allow for learners-mentors and/or role model interactions, and produce opportunities to participate in experiences that support successful engagement. Our cross-grade integration projects were designed to create such learning environments and provide students and parents with a voice in their educational pursuits. We found adaptations. Although multi-grade groups became homeroom groups, the students and parents still had a voice. Our voting system allowed us to remove projects that were of little or no interest to students and to focus on those that were of interest. Teachers looked to offer projects within their expertise and passions, such as debating. Guest speakers, such as a construction foreman, Zoomed in.

Undeniably, the unexpected shift to online learning has been the catalyst for a steep learning curve. The building of staff capacity in the use of a variety of online tools and the move to a much more cohesive and uniform system of platforms, apps, and tools are positive outcomes. Zoom for online meetings, Google Classroom for assignment tracking and collection, recording instructional lessons

or developing videos and presentations in a flipped-model classroom have advanced teacher capacity to offer learning regardless of time and space. Student learning has benefited from the unrestricted access to instruction and resources, and parents are better equipped to support their children. The adage of working smarter and not harder has been put into practice through online learning.

These difficult times have challenged our school community, demanded creative problem solving, and tested our resiliency. Lessons learned from the literacy program shifts will be applied to increase its potency. The work

inherent in addressing the numeracy program deficiencies will make it more effective. Our community connections will widen. Technology has become a part of our tool kits. While content with our former normal, we are reminded of the proverb: "Smooth seas do not make skillful sailors." ■

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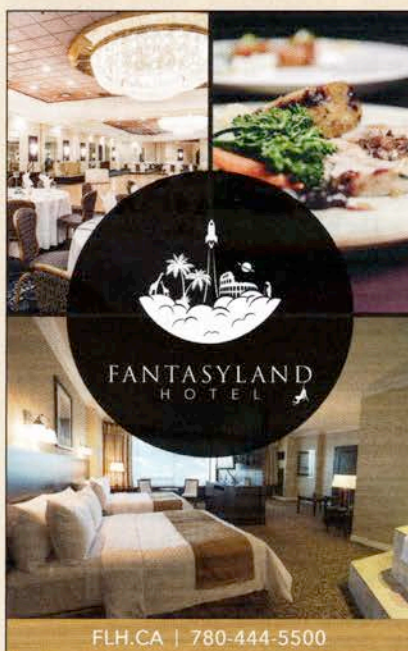
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