Catholic Schools Trailblazing Distance Learning in California

April 1, 2020
Education

When Governor Gavin Newsom urged public schools throughout the state to close in response to the threat of COVID-19, California’s 250,000 Catholic school students didn’t miss a beat in their curriculum. Although it still remains up to the County Offices of Education/School Districts whether to close, many have decided to do so and are finalizing plans to start distance learning.

On the other hand, California Catholic schools had already put into place their distance learning plans. Over the prior couple of weeks, each diocese in the state developed and launched its own similar version of “distance learning” for their students, before closing their campuses, and continuing instruction in student homes utilizing available technology.

“We had about a week to prepare when we heard from the Governor’s office that this would probably be happening,” said Sacramento Diocese Superintendent of School Lincoln Snyder.

At the end of February, Catholic school superintendents from throughout the state had gathered on retreat, and recognizing the looming threat of COVID-19, discussed what steps to take should school campuses be closed for a length of time.

While some dioceses were using robust online learning platforms already, others were able to adapt quickly so distance learning could be rolled out in conjunction with campus closures.

“We are moving forward with curriculum and not altering our academic calendar at all,” said Snyder, who pointed out that some public schools are still exploring ways to ensure students make up instructional hours that are being lost.

“It was important to keep kids engaged in community and with each other,” said Snyder.

The exact schedule and structure of distance learning vary by diocese, but many include morning check-ins online to record student attendance, video lessons from teachers, and virtual classrooms where students can see and hear each other, as well as chat and text capabilities.

Some of the technology being utilized includes Canvas, SchoolSpeak, Google Classrooms and Hangouts, Seesaw, Basecamp, and Zoom – technology that many companies and organizations often employ to conduct business remotely.
In an important distinction, Diocese of Orange Superintendent of Schools Erin Barisano also points out that the current set-up is not “homeschooling” since teachers are still active and providing new curriculum and lessons.

“This is not homeschooling,” she said. “It’s a little bit of a dance but teachers are still teaching. Parents are facilitating, and we are grateful, but teachers are still teaching.”

Communication between schools and parents, students and families has also been key.

“I have daily communications with staff and communications to parents every other day to stay connected about why we are doing this and why it’s important,” said Snyder.

Equally important for each diocese is devising ways for students to connect to their Catholic faith, especially in such a time of uncertainty.

“We have principals leading prayer in the mornings, we are encouraging family prayer at home, and there are masses online,” said Barisano. “It’s important we are finding ways to keep students and families connected to school and their faith,” said Barisano.

In the same vein, administrators are acutely aware that the current climate of uncertainty poses challenges for students, and has taken steps to reassure and encourage.

“Things are scary right now, and we know that people turn to God for comfort in times like these. Although we are teachers and administrators by profession, we are ministers by vocation, and we approach our relationships with you from that perspective. We will be there for you as we work together to build community amidst the bigger challenge we face together,” Snyder wrote in a recent letter to families.

There are still some refinements to be made, but as with most things in this age of COVID-19, adjustments are being made as necessary.

“We don’t want better to be the enemy of good,” Snyder said. “This is an experiment on a scale we’ve never seen. We are going day by day, listening to parents and adapting.”

While the programs have been largely successful, the dioceses continue to look for ways to improve or opportunities to capitalize on this experience.

In the Diocese of Orange, teachers are also experiencing the student side of distance learning. The Diocese has partnered with Loyola Marymount University (LMU) to develop online specific curriculum and ongoing professional development for educators implementing distance learning.

“We are trying to scaffold development so teachers have the tools they need and experts training them on [distance learning],” said Barisano.

Not only has the new digital classroom setup been successful, but public education officials around the state are using it as a model to develop their own distance-learning programs.
“We are already having conversations because this will redefine what education looks like, especially at the elementary level,” said Barisano. “It’s a great opportunity to light the fire and think differently and look at expanding what Catholic schools can offer.”

For the current status of Catholic schools in California please see our Coronavirus Resource page.