

BUCKS COUNTY Courier Times

George School students stay connected across time zones

By Peg Quann

Posted at 6:01 AM

With students coming from 47 countries, they're getting a real education in how the coronavirus is affecting the world.

When Gov. Tom Wolf ordered all Pennsylvania schools closed due to the coronavirus this spring, George School educators already were deep into preparations for distance learning — really distant learning.

Courses are being taught online not just across miles, but time zones.

The private school in Middletown has 550 students in ninth-through 12th grades. More than half are boarders, coming from 47 countries and 19 states. The school adheres to Quaker values and time for worship is included in the weekly schedule.

J. Sam Houser, head of school, said that as the coronavirus pandemic developed in Asia and then spread to Europe before hitting the United States hard, parents were contacting the school. They wanted to know if their children should try to return to school after the March spring break ended. They wanted “some desire of certainty,” he said.

As the pandemic grew worse and international travel became difficult, Houser and the school staff made the difficult decision that George School would need to complete the school year

online so that students could be home with their families, as a boarding school would not be a good place to practice social distancing

The school's educators used the two-and-a-half-week break to figure out how to conduct the courses considering all the technical issues involved. "We took advantage of that (time)," Houser said.

The biggest challenge has been designing a plan taking into account "time and logistics," he said, and how to keep classmates connected when some lived in Asia where it would be the middle of the night when a teacher in Middletown was offering a lesson.

The school decided that some classes would be synchronized and others would be asynchronous, meaning that the teacher might meet with specific students alone or in small numbers rather than with the class as a whole.

But the school soon found that some of the students in Asia still wanted to connect with their classmates, even if that means turning into classes at one or two o'clock in the morning their time.

"I have been surprised," Houser said. "Their attendance has been very good. Hats off to them."

Students also were sent supplies for classes like robotics so that they had the equipment they needed to complete assignments.

Film teacher Scott Seraydarian said it's been interesting teaching his classes with students in different countries. His classes — whether they be introductory, intermediate or advanced — focus on both film production and analysis.

The students “want to make films,” he said, but now that they’re at home, not everyone has the same equipment available. Some may have expensive cameras, others just their cell phone.

“What can I do without knowing what they have at their disposal,” he thought as he prepared the online curriculum for screenwriting and camera blocking. He made a video to introduce the students to how the course would go. He decided to ask them to find three objects that they could use in a stop animation film project. The project has a collaborative dimension so they can stay in touch with classmates and feed off each other’s creativity.



He said the kids were looking forward to attending the Greenfield Film Festival, an event at Upper Dublin High School where film students from various schools show their productions. Looking at it online won’t be the same as walking the green carpet to receive awards, he said.

Despite the problems, Seraydarian thinks the students will take a lot away from this distance-learning experience, especially as they see their fellow students in their own hometowns and learn how the coronavirus is affecting countries around the world from classmates who are there.

Student Julia Carrigan, who lives in Glassboro, New Jersey, is a senior preparing to attend Occidental University in California in the fall. Everyone, she said, is trying to make the most of a bad situation with the coronavirus.

She's found the Zoom classes interesting in not only how she is now learning, but how fellow students react to the online learning process. Students who were chatty in class have become quieter online, she said, while others who were very studious seem to have blossomed online, letting their personalities show more. "They're so rowdy on Zoom," she said with a laugh.

Carrigan said all the seniors needed some time to digest that their graduation would be virtual, although an actual ceremony may be planned for later.

Since the school has a trimester school year, students also were looking forward to being a "third-term senior," when they got back from spring break, to savor the last few weeks together before graduation on the campus "which is beautiful in the spring," she said. This year, that isn't happening, at least not in person. But she hopes they still will have a real graduation ceremony some day, and Carrigan has already gotten a traditional white dress for the occasion. There's a task force now planning what to do. "I've been advocating for seniors to be on the committee," she said.

Seraydarian, who himself graduated from George School, said that when Houser first told the teachers about the semester needing to be completed online, he made the analogy that it was like fixing an airplane while you're flying. "You have to figure it out as you're going."

Somehow, the faculty and students are doing that, across the miles.

He worked in the film industry for many years before returning to his alma mater to teach. He's glad to be back, and helping the current students through this unusual time.

"We love this place," he said.

