

ANNUAL EMERGENCY VIRTUAL OR REMOTE INSTRUCTION PLAN

For School Year 2021–2022

From: High Point School of Bergen County
To: Bergen County Office of Education
Date: 10-29-2021



Purpose of This Document

Pursuant to chapter 27 of P.L. 2020 of New Jersey State law A-3904, enacted in April 2020 by the state’s governor, Phil Murphy, all Local Educational Agencies (LEAs) in the state must annually submit a proposed program for emergency virtual or remote instruction “in the event that a school district is required to close the schools of the district for more than three consecutive school days due to a declared state of emergency, declared public health emergency, or a directive by the appropriate health agency or officer to institute a public health–related closure.” The intent of the public law is to ensure that schools continue to meet their 180-day requirement, even if a portion of that requirement must be completed via remote/virtual instruction.

As an Approved Private School for Students with Disabilities (APSSD), the High Point School of Bergen County has prepared and will continue to update this document as needed per school year to reflect our declared intent to comply with, cooperate with, and completely fulfill the requirements expected of all LEAs in the state of New Jersey, including guaranteeing a 180-day school year in line with the rules and standards for the equalization of opportunity and the core curriculum content standards contained in P.L. 2007 and related state mandates.

High Point School (HPS) also notes that the virtual or remote instruction implemented for general education students is to be provided to special education students “to the extent appropriate and practicable.” Acknowledging and agreeing with the premise that special education students require certain adjustments and accommodations to general education standards to best fulfill their comprehensive educational needs, this plan outlines a program specific to our population of grade 6–12+ students with moderate to severe disabilities entailing intensive academic and behavioral needs.

Scope of This Document

This “Emergency Remote or Virtual Instruction Plan” is both distinct from and related to earlier contingency education plans necessitated by the worldwide pandemic that affected all U.S. districts, schools, and classrooms as of spring 2020.

It is distinct from any other HPS school closing or school reopening plan in effect in that it concentrates on the particular areas of interest requested by the New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE) in the event of a state-declared district-wide closure—namely:

- Providing instruction to students who may not have access to a computer or to sufficient broadband or to any technology required for virtual or remote instruction
- The impact of virtual or remote instruction on the school breakfast and lunch program
- The required length of a virtual or remote instruction day

It is related to HPS’s closing and reopening plans in effect in that this document serves as a *complement* to our state-approved [“Emergency School Health-Related Closure Plan,”](#) which was informed by the NJDOE-issued [“The Road Back: Restart and Recovery Plan for Education”](#) and which contains more detailed information on all remote/virtual instruction programming elements; and it serves as a *continuation of* our state-approved [“School Reopening Plan,”](#) which was informed by the NJDOE-issued [“The Road Forward: Health and Safety Guidance for the 2021–2022 School Year”](#) and which will remain in effect and be implemented as applicable the moment the state-declared school closure is lifted and in-person instruction is allowed to resume.

In other words, all pertinent information in our state-approved remote-instruction plan remains in effect for any and all future state-declared emergency closures; and all safety and health protocols required by NJDOE and our county education office to reopen our school after such a closure also remain in effect to safely and securely resume in-person instruction once given the green light to do so. As such, this targeted “Emergency Remote or Virtual Instruction Plan” will address the specific areas of concern requested, but will not encapsulate the entirety of the content contained in the longer and more comprehensive previously approved plans.

General Guidelines of HPS’s “Emergency Virtual or Remote Instruction Plan”

- High Point School’s regular school-day hours remain the same in the event of a state-declared emergency school closure. Students will be expected to be “in attendance” from 8:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m., supervised and accompanied by their regular teachers, their regular therapists, and their regular academic schedules, instruction blocks, and work assignments.
- That said, staff will be “on the clock” both prior to and after normative school-day hours, not only to prepare for and close out each school day per usual, but also “on call” beyond that as warranted, to meet specific student needs, heed the call for any student/family emergencies or crises, and to ensure our entire school community of our continual committed presence and understanding of unusual circumstances. Throughout the pandemic-induced closure of 2020–2021, we were both heartened by and extremely grateful for our entire staff’s willingness to “be there” in all ways possible, at any time of the day or night, for our close-knit network of school families, and we’re 100% sure that their dedication to their jobs and devotion to their students will not waver during any future similar emergency school closure.
- Non-native English-speaking households that benefit from communications in their native tongue will continue to have access to materials and correspondence in their native language. In line with our current population of students (who are all native English speakers themselves), we have several fluent Spanish speakers on staff who act as direct contacts with applicable parents and who

supply all relevant information and paperwork in Spanish upon request, including progress reports, needs assessments, IEP documentation, school announcements, etc. Family mental health services are also offered in Spanish, along with related community-based health resources, to assist Latin communities.

- Just as our in-school program is centered on individualized learning, it is imperative that our virtual/remote instruction maintains the highest level of individualization possible. Of paramount importance to our special education students are continuity of learning, an uninterrupted sense of consistency and stability, and, most of all, ongoing personalized attention to help them stay on track with their academic and behavior goals. Regardless of their learning environment, our students learn best when their PLPs and custom-designed interventions are delivered without fail, so it goes without saying that differentiated instruction will remain our North Star, even under emergency conditions.
- On a related note, across-the-board IEP fulfillment is the ultimate aim—to ensure that each student’s individualized needs are being met regardless of instruction location, to maintain momentum of progress as much as possible, and to stay on-point and on-target with each student’s identified academic and behavioral goals and prescribed services. Our focus here is to not have students fall significantly behind or suffer the effects of enlarged learning gaps as a result of cessation of in-person learning through no fault of their own. Our students want to advance, they want to proceed to the next grade level and celebrate graduations. And because we want that for them as much as they want it for themselves, our IEP process will remain unchanged during any type of emergency closure beyond three days, just as it did throughout 2020–2021. Specifically:
 - All regularly scheduled IEP meetings will take place as originally planned.
 - Each student’s district case manager will initiate and conduct the meeting via teleconference.
 - Student case managers will receive weekly Educational Verification Log Sheets that detail such parameters as daily attendance, subject-matter performance, IEP goal achievement, IEP objective attainment, length of educational services, type of educational services (delivery format), and provision of related services.
 - Ongoing data collection, represented in log sheets and other relevant documentation, will be maintained for IEP evaluations and reevaluations.
 - Internally, HPS maintains an Excel spreadsheet on each student’s daily performance, including daily assignments, IEP goals addressed, and progress made on these goals. This documentation holds our students, our teachers, and our school administration accountable to perform their normative duties, matched as closely as possible with in-person learning.
- Direct academic instruction is emphasized during times of emergency closures, to keep students in the habit of studying and completing assignments, but it’s not the only thing we attend to rigorously. All aspects of our program and education model, in fact, will continue to be implemented, to the greatest extent practicable, including SEL activities, wraparound services, remote-based instruction in our career-readiness curriculum, scaffolded learning, mental health supports, physical activity, and keeping our families in touch with whatever community-based services they may need throughout the closure.

Plan Requirement #1: Measuring & Addressing the “Digital Divide”

Our goal to address the digital divide during times of remote learning is simple: to not have a digital divide in the first place. To accomplish this:

- We will work—we *have* worked—with each of our families individually to ensure that their household has steady internet access at acceptable broadband speed.
- We collaborate with them to contact their cable companies, access resources available to them, and make sure the home is outfitted as quickly and adequately as possible.
- Even if local providers cease to provide the free or low-cost options extended to low-income families during the COVID pandemic, we will ensure that cable bills are paid and that internet access remains intact.
- Our IT department performs tech checks to gauge continual internet access and resolve any pending issues.
- Once we’ve established that the student and staff have clear two-way video and audio, online instruction can proceed as planned.
- Every student is given a Chromebook and every staff member a similar device (often iPads) to facilitate and expedite effective online communication and learning, using up-to-date, reliable technology.
- If they break them, we replace them; if they’re not fully operational, we get them a new one.
- Just like they do on the computers at school, students access the learning apps through desktop icons familiar to them and websites they regularly visit. Student sign-ons remain the same, and their accounts record and store their information, log-on times, and performance results as usual.
- We regularly check in with parents/guardians to confirm that in-home technology is working properly and that all necessary connectivity is intact. Parents/guardians have also been alerted that they can contact us first before we contact them upon any interruption to service or damage to equipment.
- On-call tech support is available to all students, families, and staff from the IT consultant assigned to their case.

NOTE: It should be noted that the way in which the term “digital divide” is normally used doesn’t really apply to our school community. Most of our families have similar lifestyles, live in similar communities, face similar challenges. There are not large geographical or socioeconomic differences among our school community that would create a clearly demarcated line between those “with” adequate technology and those “without.” For this reason, we feel the content of this section applies to all our school families as a whole.

Though there are many disadvantages to virtual schooling, accessibility to and the volume of online teaching materials, thank goodness, is not one of them! Had the unprecedented pandemic-induced closure happened just ten or even five years ago, this likely would not have been the case; but as it is, computer-assisted learning has been a pillar of our instructional approach for over a decade, all our students are computer literate and very comfortable with on-screen modalities, and we incorporate technology into our model every school day, in myriad ways.

So—to be honest—the real challenge isn't getting the technology to work while students are off-premises, it's getting them to the screen when they're expected to be at the screen. Our students' greatest motivation is the positive reinforcement they receive from their teachers and counselors while in school. So when we're not there in person to encourage and prompt them to do their work, they're often reluctant to do so.

There's no easy fix for this. Research has shown that special education students especially need the nurturance, support, and in-person care and guidance of their instructional team. We've instituted several measures to try to remedy this—to assertively try to “get them to the screen” (and then display real effort while there)—like choosing more engaging and enjoyable instructional materials (see “Lessons Learned” section below) and offering at-home rewards when they fulfill their expected screen time. But we've found that what's been most effective with the reluctant student is sending hard-copy packets home of class assignments and homework—to offer them another means of completing their coursework on their own time if and when they feel “forced” to get online, particularly when they're feeling emotionally unbalanced or out-of-sorts because of the loss of their in-school stability and support. (Mailed or hand-delivered home packets are also advantageous, of course, for times when internet service is spotty.)

Our students know they *need* to do their schoolwork—like we said, they don't want to fall behind; they want to advance in life and in school—so traditional paper materials are sometimes the better option when a student is experiencing online “burnout.” Through it all, we “stay on them” very frequently and very diligently, with calls or visits home, with texts, with email—with any means available to us to minimize the academic divide that can form when students are not attending school each day.

Plan Requirement #2: Provision of Meals During School Hours

One of the hallmarks of a school like ours—a special education facility that enrolls a relatively small number of students and serves families as a whole, not just one child as an academic pupil—is our very close, very tight relationships with our families. We know them well and are on a first-name basis with them. We know each and every student's living conditions. We know who's in need. We know who has transportation limitations. We know when resources or supplies are scarce, and we know when family members are ill, unemployed, or facing other hardships.

That's how we know that no family of ours, let alone no student of ours, will go hungry. Here are steps that would be in place during the span of an emergency school closure:

- We reach out first with weekly, if not daily, surveys to assess food and related supplies levels—we do not wait for a family member to call us to see if we can provide assistance.
- When meals are requested or required, we supply a wide and ample array of foodstuffs that we procure on our own at grocery stores, restaurants, shops, and take-out spots.
- We take the food to the family, not the other way around, either delivering it ourselves or taking advantage of food delivery services.
- If the applicable emergency requires social distancing, we alert families that we're on our way and we leave the deliveries on the doorstep; if not, we hand-deliver meals with “house calls” that provide the extra advantage of giving us eyes on our students and in-person contact.

- If the family would prefer to pick up the provisions themselves, we arrange for a convenient meeting place for them for the handoff.
- If, as during the COVID pandemic, local school districts are providing free breakfast and lunch at designated locations, we distribute the list of locations and pickup times both as hard copy and posted on our website.
- If food pantries are also participating in emergency measures, we make sure our families know when, where, and how to access provisions.
- We do not limit our provisions to just student meals—if our families need OTC medicines or toiletries, paper products, school supplies, pet food ... we purchase it and make sure that it gets to them in a timely fashion. Depending on the nature of the emergency closure, of course (a health-related crisis versus a natural disaster, for example), appropriate safety measures will be taken (like drive-thru grocery pickups) and our students and their loved ones will never be put at risk simply to feed their families.

Plan Requirement #3: Length of Virtual or Remote Instruction Day

High Point School is fully aware that the minimum requirement for a virtual or remote day is 4 hours of instruction time; however, we're going to shoot for more than that—informing our students that their regular school hours of 8:30 a.m. to 2:30 a.m. apply and are expected of them—and hope that they, too, achieve significantly more than the minimum!

Their instruction will continue to be provided by their regular classroom teacher and TA; classes will proceed in their normal order; and students will be held to the same norms, guidelines, and behavior standards expected of them in the classroom.

To maintain the consistency and structure that our students are accustomed to, we will adhere to the schedule in place during the COVID pandemic thusly:

- **8:30–10:15:** Students are expected to “come to school” having completed their requisite daily and weekly assignments, which the teacher reviews with them in real time. Mornings are usually devoted to core subjects, with a concentration on ELA and math, while the students are fresh and energized. Direct instruction proceeds on an individual basis and in small groups (see “Lessons Learned” below about one-on-one and smaller groupings having proved more effective with our students) while other small groups simultaneously work with their TA on the day’s lesson work and/or, if needed, are given a chance to “catch up” from the day before. So this span combines our regular “assisted independent seatwork” and “teacher-led instruction” segments of the school day—only all online in our remote model.
- **10:15–10:30:** Break (physical activity recommended)
- **10:30–12:00:** Online check-ins and scheduled telecommunication/online meetings continue, with our teachers, TAs, school leaders, and specialty personnel, alternately and as needed, making phone calls, holding Zoom chats, and attending Google Meets to follow up on individual workloads, to identify problem areas that need resolution, to deliver personalized instruction, and to actively encourage and prompt the students to immediately proceed to their afternoon sessions right after lunch.
- **12:00–12:30:** Lunch Break (including some form of physical “recess”)

- **12:30–2:30:** Based on staff recommendations for next steps, students are expected to turn to their online learning programs now (our “computer-assisted instruction” segment), which include virtual sessions for their IEP-prescribed related services, if applicable. Participation on online platforms is the goal of this time span, so we can better assess absorption of the day’s learning, make adjustments to future weekly lesson plans, and continue propelling the students’ ability and empowerment to self-motivate and self-regulate. Staff accompanies and monitors students on the software, and students know they can questions or request assistance throughout. Group activities are also sometimes added to the afternoon session as time allows, to maintain peer socialization and to generalize current learning to real-world scenarios.

Within this structure, students are actively “at school” for 5.75 hours per day. But it’s important to point out that, although a 6-hour school day will be in effect for each weekday of the emergency closure period—meaning that our teachers will be required to be online and available to all of their students during that time frame (by phone as well as by computer device)—a certain degree of flexibility will not only be allowed, but can also be quite helpful to the individual student.

In other words, as long as they complete their assignments, they will be allowed to do so during hours outside the 8:30–2:30 window. When working from home, students are exposed to an array of distractions and interruptions—siblings making noise, family needs that conform to time limits, parents who are required to use the home’s technological devices at the same time for work—so we want to acknowledge and accept these realities, emphasizing to our students that completing the work expected of them is more important than the exact hours in which they complete it.

We’ve noticed, for example, that students will read books more and longer when they can do so during quiet times in their own personal spaces and that their concentration levels are higher (evidenced by recorded time on task metrics) when their home environment is in a subdued state, like after siblings have been put to bed. Given all this, we talk to our families about minimum requirements, maximizing learning time, acclimating our procedures to suit their family schedules and routines, and—critically—reaching out for assistance if they notice their child is having a problem in any particular area.

Bottom line: We’re aware that we can’t enforce hard-and-fast rules from afar like we can in the physical presence of our students within the school building; but, in general, we nevertheless aim to ensure equal coverage of subject-matter assignments, teacher-led instruction, support services, and progress monitoring per a consistent yet flexible scheduling framework.

Remote Instruction Curriculum Focus

Core subjects are given precedence over elective course material to keep students focused on mandatory areas of literacy. Though we cannot guarantee full participation for the assigned 5.75 daily hours, we can adequately and accurately assess progress through assignment fulfillment, attendance at regularly scheduled teacher-student videoconferences, and log-in hours on our online learning platforms. As a result of what we observe, we sometimes spend more online time with one student than another, we will patiently revisit an assignment or project for as long as it takes to achieve the expected outcome, and additional staff members are brought in as needed to address newly arising barriers to learning or issues attributable to the virtual environment.

Instructional plans will not significantly differ from the same lesson plans already in place for the school year, we'll simply implement them online instead of in person, with appropriate substitutions—using a computerized whiteboard in place of a classroom blackboard, for instance, and using electronic markup tools to grade assignments instead of the traditional pen/pencil.

Fuller details of our remote-instruction model can be found in our “Emergency School Health-Related Closure Plan” at <https://highpointschool.com/school-closure-information-updates/> (under “HPS School Plans”).

Computerized Instruction Materials

We employ a broad range of educational software and online education programs—and this range only grew during the 2020–2021 course of remote instruction. The core programs we rely on include:

- Renaissance Star 360 (for online education, progress monitoring, and assessments)
- Apex Learning Virtual School (to mitigate regression and pursue credit recovery)
- Google Classroom
- Nearpod
- NewsELA
- Khan Academy

Attendance

HPS administration will closely monitor daily student attendance by the following parameters: (1) phone calls home, to check in with and ensure daily student engagement, to follow up on assignments, to answer questions, and to provide assistance; (2) video chats with teachers to support student needs; and (3) log-in time on online platforms.

If a student does not log on to their online instructional sessions for the time assigned, just like if they don't show up at school, then they are marked as absent. Just like in the physical classroom as well, students have both IEP goals and work goals that must be achieved. Without hitting those targets, the students don't advance and must repeat the work required of them until they've reached sufficient mastery.

When absenteeism is suspected or apparent, we take a two-pronged approach:

1. We reach out to the student directly, as quickly as possible. A staff member close to the student—usually their lead teacher or social worker—makes one-on-one contact with the student to redirect their efforts and steer them back on track. We probe them with open-ended questions to try to get to the root of the matter, we counsel and guide as warranted, and we schedule a remote intervention meeting if deemed helpful with their counselor or favorite instructor. Together, we devise a follow-up plan and elicit the student's cooperation in the plan, making sure they're aware of the ramifications if performance deficits continue.

2. We reach out to the parents/guardians directly, as soon as it's deemed advisable. That is, if our initial attempts to motivate the student directly don't produce desired results, we contact the parent by their preferred means to involve them in addressing and resolving the issue. We provide guidance on overcoming challenges with their kids and on how to assist the home-schooling process; we hold virtual family meetings so that the student knows both school and home are united in refocusing their efforts and that there will be consequences in each setting if absenteeism continues; and if there's a significant issue impeding the child's progress that could be assisted by a third party—like a social services agency to address mental health crises in the home or access to household necessities—then we make arrangements to help the family through their immediate needs.

Continued Provision of Related Services

A state-declared emergency closure lasting beyond three consecutive school days will not interrupt a student's receipt of their IEP-prescribed therapeutic services in any way. So a student who receives speech therapy on Tuesdays from 1:00 to 1:45 will still receive speech therapy on Tuesdays from 1:00 to 1:45, from the same related service provider (we currently contract with Invo Healthcare), from the exact same therapist, carrying on with the same exact treatment plan that was being delivered at school.

This not only benefits the student with uninterrupted treatment delivery and continuity of learning, it benefits the service providers, who already had their caseloads and schedules in place for various students or schools they "visit."

For school year 2021–2022, only a fraction of our students are receiving related services (almost all of them speech-language therapy, with just a few receiving occupational therapy), so we're not expecting ongoing and uninterrupted treatment delivery to be an issue; and because of all the ramp-up and training done for educational professionals during the COVID pandemic, our third-party service providers, just like our internal staff, are prepared to shift to a virtual model when needed and are equipped with the technology and connectivity to do so effectively and efficiently.

Likewise, HPS-staff-provided services will carry on per the norm. These include regular social work services and mental health/behavioral counseling services, delivered by the same school social worker each student already knows and trusts and with whom they are already bonded. We've found that this continuity in personal interaction with the same counselors our students meet with at school plays a central role in their emotional well-being and equilibrium during trying times.

Lessons Learned from SY 2020–2021 Applied to SY 2021–2022

One positive outcome of the pandemic that closed schools nationwide in 2021–2022 is that High Point School is now fully aware of the challenges posed by a remote instruction plan and, in turn, fully prepared to not just tackle them, but effectively overcome them. Here are some highlights that would inform and individualize the need for this "Emergency Virtual or Remote Instruction Plan" to be put into effect.

Family Engagement Isn't a Preference, It's a Prerequisite

The biggest takeaway we've had from our experience with remote instruction is that we can't do it without buy-in from our students' family networks—actually, without buy-in from *everyone* involved. And we don't mean a little family involvement; we mean *a lot*.

In a remote environment, we don't have eyes on our students nearly as often as we usually do ... and these are students who badly need eyes on them—professionally trained and experienced eyes—to stay incentivized, to sustain their budding belief in themselves, and to continue developing their academic skills and nourishing their behavioral outcomes. And so we have to “tag team” it with our parents/guardians. Yes, we're used to working in partnership with our families—wherein caregivers are the overseers and providers of at-home care and follow-through and our faculty oversees and provides for all of the student's needs during the school day. But when the school day is at home, then we have to form a united front on a whole other level. A deep level. We need parents attuned with and involved in *all* aspects of their child's educational plan, coordinating and ensuring such things as: dedicated time blocks in which to conduct schoolwork, a dedicated space in which to complete schoolwork, adequate nutrition and sleep time, limited social media and TV time, regular physical activity and screen breaks—you name it, we need our parents to stay on top of it. This includes the big things (have they confirmed their attendance at the upcoming IEP meeting) and the small things (today's history assignment of answering 10 essay questions).

So what does such deep involvement look like in practice? Well, it manifests as constant contact (virtually daily) between our staff and our families. It requires tenacity on our part and commitment on theirs. It means repeatedly inviting parents to call, text, or email the School Supervisor and their child's teacher(s) and social worker with any questions, concerns, or requests for support. It means leaning on us when they need help and leaning on them when their child's effort is flagging. We send regular notifications of any and all updates via automated texts; we post any and all pertinent materials on a dedicated school closure web page (<https://highpointschool.com/school-closure-information-updates/>) and specific alerts on our home page (<https://highpointschool.com>); and we make it known that we're available 24/7 if there's anything we can do to help a family in need or manage a crisis. Most of all, we make “house calls” to get those eyes on our students—and not just our students; we need to see their caretakers—sit with them and share with them and smile and cry with them—to create and then sustain the solid, singular bonds essential to supporting the child's comprehensive needs from all the adults in their life, at home and at school. Obviously when in-person home visits are restricted due to health concerns or emergency conditions, our fact-to-face meetings are via video chat.

Virtual Instruction Is Easier Said Than Done

There's so many success stories out there—so much posted content on the web—about schools and families doing amazing things during lockdowns, doing all kinds of creative projects, trying new things they've never tried before, and devising strategies to increase quality time and decrease downtime. It's all truly inspiring ... and also a little intimidating to parents with limited means, limited resources, and significant to severe life challenges.

The truth is, students with intensive needs do best in the classroom—there’s no argument on this point, so we’re not going to make an argument lauding virtual instruction for kids who need patient and perpetual compassion, encouragement, and direction to thrive. We will do our best in the event of another emergency closure—we *have* done our best and we’re spectacularly proud of the way our staff, our students, our families, and our larger support teams have stepped up and showed up during times of crisis—but our best in a remote environment is simply not going to be as good as our best in the classroom.

By acknowledging this, we can take steps to get as close as we can to re-creating our in-school practices. As such, as part of any emergency education plan, we will amp up family involvement to the max (see previous section). We will incorporate novel lessons and activities that are more engaging and interactive than purely instructional—by turning up the “fun,” we’ve learned that we turn on our students’ receptors more from afar. And we will continue to find all ways and means at our disposal to deepen our connection to our students and their families.

Special education is all about connection. If we had to pick one word to encapsulate our mission, it’s “connection.” So the very second we’re given the green light to reopen our doors, they’ll be unlocked. We are in no way looking for elongated “away time”; we have to work longer and harder, just like our students do, to make up for “away time”; and we’ll be set and ready to get back to business as usual—harder and faster for a while, whatever it takes—the moment we’re given clearance that the emergency plan is no longer in effect.

Taking Care of Our Staff Is Almost Equally Important as Taking Care of our Students

The well-being of our educators translates to the well-being of our students. When staff and students are performing their duties remotely, therefore, the school’s senior leadership team checks in with their direct reports daily and conducts comprehensive assessments of mind-set, emotional state, and energy level. We plan online group sessions for colleagues to share their concerns, problems, and problem solutions; and we regularly survey the staff to gather their input on what they need and want—both material and immaterial—to facilitate their job duties. It’s critical that we keep abreast of their mental state while they’re paying such close attention to their students’ mental state.

When and if needed, we direct our faculty to professional resources that offer support specifically for the education community (e.g., CASEL), and we promote daily de-stressing practices, like mindfulness, deep breathing, and meditation. We are also very open to supporting and financing wellness programs and certifications in which our staff shows interest.

Additionally, since the time of COVID, one of our certified special education teachers has been acting as our designated online instruction coordinator. All of our teachers became more than adept at virtual instruction last year, it’s true, but in the event of future periods of remote schooling, this staff member will continue in this role, not only easing the load of students’ regular classroom teachers by assisting wherever needed, but serving to supervise and manage all of our online instruction in general. Our other teachers find it both comforting and very reassuring to know they have an experienced “specialist” to consult on best practices concerning online apps, remote-instruction strategies, online student engagement, and the like.

On a practical level, our staff support efforts include on-call technical support—making sure all instructors and therapists who have direct contact with students can do so smoothly and seamlessly. Training is made available to them on any programs, platforms, or software with which they may not be familiar, and allowing them to fully reveal their creativity and innovation in lesson planning is warmly encouraged. Again, it’s about connection—fostering avenues to keep it going and keep it going strong among our own internal team—so we can best take care of our larger team.

Minimize Whole-Class Instruction in Favor of Maximum One-on-One Instruction

It’s a given that we cannot lose sight of striving to attain age-appropriate benchmarks, grade-level milestones, core curricular requirements, and standardized expectations even during emergency school closures. That’s why we emphasize core subject-matter classes when students are learning online, why we continue to uphold assessment practices as much as possible, and why students are not given a “pass” on completing their assignments and showing up for mandatory attendance.

That said, not all of our standard practices work as well in a virtual environment. Whole-class instruction, for example (with a maximum of 10 students on the screen together at once) has not proven as effective as more individualized attention when our students are off-premises. So we adapted. When attention went down (already a challenge with our students) and results slipped in tandem, we pivoted to more one-on-one sessions and fewer large-group sessions. Even when instructing multiple students at a time, we’ve moved to smaller-group gatherings (say, three students simultaneously, all working on the same unit) over class-wide lessons. We’ve also found that students are far more likely to “get to the screen” when they know they’ll be meeting with a staff member one-on-one, so it works to everyone’s advantage: the teacher can get a much fuller picture of the student’s status when that student is their exclusive focus for a designated period of time, and the student is highly attentive and immersed in the work when they feel privileged to be that exclusive focus.

Because student IEPs must necessarily drive our instruction whether in school or out, we adhere to curriculum standards, yes, but more important to special education students is the sense of consistency, security, and predictability they’ve come to depend on in the classroom. So when it’s warranted and when it benefits the child’s immediate needs, truly individualized and personalized interventions take priority over grade-band expectations or standardized test preparation.

Our Students Want to Be in School

This one surprised us (a little!). What did we happily learn during the period of remote instruction throughout the pandemic? They would rather be in school. They want to learn away from home. They admit that they apply themselves far more in the classroom. They miss their peers, and they miss us as much as we miss them! This is all we needed to hear to recharge our batteries, refuel our tanks, and give us “mental permission” to be as invasive and bold in pushing them to participate as they told us they need us to be when we’re away from them.

Interestingly, our students are “used to” online education now—they themselves learned what does and does not work for them in terms of “getting them to the screen,” and they shared their thoughts with us. Specifically, as mentioned above, the “fun factor” is a real thing. They told us that they’re much more likely to properly attend to their coursework when it’s more fun—when it feels more like an enjoyable activity they’re “playing” on their tablet than a formal assignment they have to turn in and be graded on. So our wonderful staff went to work, hand-picking additional materials that still teach their students, but entertain them at the same time. Materials like YouTube videos of experiments they can try at home; close readings of songs by popular singers instead of book reports or poetry analysis; animated characters giving interesting talks instead of adult voices lecturing; recipes to follow, to practice measurement skills and following directions; History Channel documentaries in lieu of textbook chapters on historical events; virtual tours of historic landmarks and museums worldwide ... things they’ve never seen and places they’ve never been.

So part of this or any future remote learning program will factor in the fun as much as possible. Our teachers find the challenge of holding students’ attention from afar much more manageable when the students are enjoying their assignments and not “resisting” the learning cleverly implanted in them. The ultimate goal here is maximum engagement with diverse and stimulating content until we can personally engage them again in the school setting.

Contact Information

For further information about protocols and procedures applicable to the High Point School of Bergen County’s “Emergency Virtual or Remote Instruction Plan” for SY 2021–2022, please contact:

Cindy Pulido
Supervisor, HIGH POINT SCHOOL OF BERGEN COUNTY
Phone: 973-574-0344
Email: cpulido@highpointschool.com
highpointschool.com