

## Idaho Catholic Schools Re-created in the Midst of Uncertain Times

It's 8:45 a.m. on Monday, March 30. Instead of dropping off children at St. Paul's Catholic School in Nampa, parents are given scheduled times to do a curbside pick-up of materials, following the proper social distancing guidelines.

It's 9 a.m. School bells are ringing in hallways that have been empty since March 13, 2020. Angela Hild and Fr. Joseph Lustig from St. Edward's Catholic School in Twin Falls are welcoming students to the week with prayer and announcements through Facebook. Students and parents comment and send hearts throughout the Facebook Live presentation. Mrs. Hild greets the students and families by name as she sees them appear in the Facebook Live feed. "We pray that all of our students are doing well...I miss you guys. We are looking forward to this next chapter," said Mrs. Hild.

Now it's 9:15 a.m., and three children are seated at their kitchen table, each with a Chromebook and several school materials. One child is watching a video of Mrs. Bernstein (St. Mark's, 2<sup>nd</sup> grade, Boise) teaching a math lesson. Another child is practicing vocabulary and grammar on Spelling City, and the third child is attending a live session via Google Hangouts with his English teacher, Mrs. Gamboa (St. Joseph's Catholic School, Boise). The teachers are stationed in various locations (their guest room, their classroom, their own kitchen table), and this new way of learning is becoming the norm.

Leave this kitchen table, and you will find teachers at Holy Family in Coeur d'Alene providing Parent-Teacher conferences to their families via phone, Google Hangout, or Zoom. Or, travel to Idaho Falls where a kindergartener is submitting his math assignment via an iPhone video of him jumping and mapping out math problems.

Or, look at the Bishop Kelly High School students using Schoology, a Learning Management System, to interact with their teachers, watch recorded lessons, and continue to complete assignments in their selected courses. The counselors at Bishop Kelly High School are available for social emotional support throughout this time of cancelled sports and separation from peers.

All 16 Idaho Catholic schools are still educating students, even though they cannot let the students physically into their doors right now. Schools are truly "partnering with parents" to make sure that students have the necessary tools to learn from their home.

By March 15, all Catholic schools in Idaho closed their doors to traditional learning due the COVID-19 outbreak. In the midst of this closure, administrators and teachers were busy meeting and planning to keep learning going, even though students could not physically come to school. The teachers had to define what standards and skills students need to learn and be able to do and learn tools that would allow students to learn those concepts at a distance.

On April 6, the Idaho State Board of Education stated the closure of Idaho schools will continue until specific criteria are met to ensure the safety of staff and students. Schools have to think about First Communions, graduation ceremonies, and other ways of recognizing and celebrating students.

Teachers have been working really hard during this crisis time. At this point in the year, they know their students well, and they are able to provide materials that are appropriate for those students. The teachers have faced many challenges: how do they get students to access the materials and engage with them? How do they make sure students are learning? How do they support the families who have direct contact with the students? How do they help students stay connected to the school and each other? Preschool teacher from St. Ignatius in Meridian, Krystin Newman said, “We preschool teachers are working so hard because we love our students and we want them to have the best. We continue to put our whole hearts and souls into what we’re doing. When we see our students post a video for us we miss their faces so much! We love to see how hard they are working.”

Idaho Catholic schools were poised and ready to go with learning very quickly once the closure was announced. Part of this is that many of the schools are small and were able to provide resources (i.e. Chromebooks and online tools) to students who needed them. Part of this is that many of the teachers were already using tools in the classroom that they could translate into distance learning. Part of this is the close work that Idaho Catholic schools already do with their students and families.

Brian Olmes, principal of St. Mary’s Catholic School in Boise, and his wife Holly made a Facebook video called “One Zoom Call” away. It is a parody of a popular song, and it was meant to bring joy during this uncertain time, as well as to let the families of St. Mary’s know that the school is still there for them during this closure.

All of the Idaho Catholic schools are anxious to have their students back on campus. The best way to serve students and families is to have them present in the classrooms and celebrating the Sacraments. Even with all of the uncertainties, schools are planning for the 2020-21 school year; all of the schools are currently enrolling. If you desire a Catholic education for your students, please reach out to the schools. They have been a place of stability and comfort in this trying time.