



St. Gregory the Great Academy

A Ministry of the Church of St. Gregory the Great

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MEMORANDUM

DATE: September 25, 2020

TO: All Parents, Faculty, and Staff

FROM: Dr. Jason C. Briggs, Principal

RE: **Operational Update #13**

As we approach the final weekend of September 2020, I would like to provide some relevant updates concerning our operations. Before I get into the specifics, however, allow me the chance to share some thoughts that have occurred to me now that we have completed a full month of this school year. As usual, I apologize in advance to anyone whom my directness offends. I mean no disrespect. This is a confusing, stressful, and scary time. This may sound cliché by now, but I think that it is very important to recognize that, even though we have had the good fortune of maintaining in-person instruction, things are far from “normal.” I am not sure about you, but quite frankly I have a great deal of skepticism regarding many aspects of the current pandemic crisis and what to believe. I am not a doctor, a scientist, or a political leader. I have no qualifications to make pronouncements about what the virus has done or will do. I am not famous, I have never been to a rally, and have no political affiliation. One thing that I do know a pretty decent amount about is research methods. From this training, I have learned about two very serious dangers that can affect research and discovery. One major danger is believing something simply because someone you like or identify with in some manner says so. The second major danger is taking a single study or bits of some studies and declaring this data as “proof.” From where I sit, these two dangers are overrunning our culture right now, and they are having a deleterious effect on the people I care most about, that is, my home family and my school family.

Those whom I care very much about are being pounded by the nature of COVID-19 combined with the two major dangers I have detailed. I observe this from the time I wake up until the time I go to sleep. While our children are comparatively lucky in that they can come to school in-person for five full days, the school that they have returned to is very different from the one they left. These school days, while much better than remote days, in my opinion, are not like school days used to be. In every corner of the school, procedures are different in order to protect them from an unseen enemy. Academic challenges are emerging as an inevitable result of how the last school year ended. There are social challenges aplenty, especially in the middle school grades, very much because the students who left school in March are not the same students



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who have returned in terms of maturity. Middle school is hard enough; now add in basically learning how to be together and reestablish the social bonds again. The students move according to bells, announcements, directional signs, and the like. Teachers and staff are certainly also trying to navigate this half-familiar and half-new place. As adults, they are aware of and smothered by the endless stream of people in the media who pronounce that they are right and that they know what is best. They deal with the uncertainty of wondering if today will be the day that they hear from me that we must switch to remote instruction. Teachers and staff are also moving around according to new school configurations, trying to be to classes on time while not leaving any classes unattended. Some even have to monitor their liquid intake because we cannot provide them with proper "comfort breaks." To top it off, when they finally get to go home, hoping that they are not serving as a vector of infection for their own familiar, they are flooded with the sounds of righteous talking heads who have not set foot into a classroom, much less a school, in 20, 30, or 40 years.

Then there are the parents, those who entrust their most precious children to our school. They drop their children off, perhaps see them to their tents, and then their children disappear into the various doorways of the school. As it is now, parents are not even allowed to enter the school building that their children spend hours inside each day. Even more sobering is the fact that most of the parents of children who are new to SGGA this year have never even seen the hallways and classrooms that their children occupy each day and will not do so for the foreseeable future. Many parents likely worry about getting the email or the call that someone is COVID-19 positive in school, or in their child's class. From my desk (which I see very little of anymore) I wonder if our mode of operation is the right one. By now you probably know I am in constant "papa bear" mode in terms of COVID-19 and our kids. Are our procedures an overkill at this point, or still very necessary. I do not know what the answer is. School districts all over the state are in various states of physical opening. Who is doing it the right way? I do not know. I made some people angry this week when I denied them permission to violate out protocols in the interest of doing their job. Was that decision right or wrong? Every time I see a student heading into the nurse's office I wonder if this poor kid is "the one" who will trigger COVID-19 remote protocols. SGGA had a relatively smooth opening, all things considered. We also benefitted from amazing September weather; what happens in October? Which schools of our size (436 students) are open for 5 full days of in-person instruction for all students? Is everyone safe in such places? I most certainly am not going to make SGGA the experiment. Still, can we all safely be indoors all day, even when masks are off and everyone is eating? Am I going to have to make scheduling decisions as the weather turns colder that will be very unpopular and disruptive? I do not know. How about in the larger view? Is government overreach occurring? Is the pandemic worsening or getting better? Could political motives be driving policy? It is most certainly possible, but is this what is happening currently? Who do I believe? Does this week's new study reflect reality? Can it be replicated, has it been repeated, and is the data clean? Does anyone know the long-term effect of COVID-19? (Spoiler alert – the answer is NO since there has not been a long term yet.) How is this whole vaccine thing going to work? Is it something to look forward to, or will it be a new battle? Did science prevail over concerns? Who has the golden ticket? Not me. (Maybe Grandpa Joe?) What happens if I pull back toward normalcy, and someone gets seriously ill? On the other hand, what is the endgame? Is this truly the new reality?

In the midst of all of this, teaching, learning, and parenting continue. Like everything else, however, it is not the same. Anxiety is just below the surface for many of us. Depression is a stalking predator for some people. Remember, anxiety manifests in many different ways, some of which may not seem apparent at first. Take a look [HERE](#). Depression, especially among adults, has ballooned. Take a look [HERE](#). These afflictions do not happen in isolation. Entire families are affected, and the uncertainty that we all face simply

fans the flames. Remember, schedules and predictability are a balm to those who deal with anxiety since they make life more predictable. Take away the predictability, and the opposite occurs. Some parents, and teachers, feel helpless.

From where I sit, the only way in which we will continue to be successful is to support each other and bring a great deal of patience to each day. Try to drown out the two major dangers, which both result from trying to oversimplify a very complex situation. When something does not go right or how we want it to, approach the situation as collaboratively as possible. Refrain from demands and blame. It is human nature to want to go above and beyond for those people who treat you respectfully and look to collaborate. Be patient with those who come across rude or angry and allow some time to elapse before engaging with them. Talk, and listen. Understand that there are currently situations all around us that have no good solutions at present. This is hard to accept, but it is where we find ourselves. Try your best to make something work; do not let the perfect be the enemy of the good. If you find yourself getting wrapped up in a fit or becoming hopeless, take a social media and regular media break. Most importantly, be aware of the social/emotional wellness of those whom you love and care for.

Now, for some updates:

69. **Uniforms** – (*status quo through Thanksgiving*) As we begin to prepare for cooler temperatures, I think it would be helpful to have some direction to guide uniform purchases that need to occur. Thus, we will remain in PE Uniforms/Spirit Wear through Thanksgiving. I highly suggest that everyone is prepared for cold temperatures, both in the tents and inside the buildings. We will continue to use the tents as long as we possibly can. While our new ventilation measures are necessary and helpful, they will also start pulling in colder air as the temperatures eventually lower. The heating system will mitigate this somewhat, but I do not see the building being warm and toasty this fall.

70. **STAR Assessment** – (*STAR Assessments are this coming week*) Grades 2-8 will be taking the STAR Reading and STAR Math assessments this coming week. These standardized assessments are administered in all Catholic elementary schools in the Diocese of Trenton. The STAR assessments are computer-adaptive standardized assessments. The types and classes of test items adjust based on the student's responses as the assessment progresses. Essentially, the assessment adapts using a vast bank of test items as it progresses. Instead of each student taking an identical test, each student takes a test that adapts to his or her strengths and weaknesses using various classes of questions. The STAR Assessment will produce statistically valid and reliable data. Operationally, the STAR Assessment is given three times per year in both Reading and Math, with each assessment taking approximately 20-40 minutes. As a result, the student experience is about 40-80 minutes of testing (cumulatively for Reading and Math) three times each year (Fall, Winter, and Spring). The STAR Assessment is taken on a computer or Chromebook.

I will be sending out more information regarding the schedule for STAR testing over the weekend. Remote students will be expected to take their STAR assessments at the same time as their in-person classmates. Students with ISPs will have the ability to have a text to speech feature activated for the Math STAR Assessment. Parents of all qualified students will receive an email asking your preference in terms of using the text to speech option for the math assessment; if parents do opt for this feature it will be up to the parents to send their child to school with a pair of earbuds on the proper day.

Those students with ISPs who qualify for extended time will have this programmed into the system; there will be no visual indication of the extended time during the assessment.

71. **Remote Back to School Nights** – (*Schedules and links are coming soon*) Also over the weekend, you will receive the schedule for the back to school nights. Remote Back to School Night will take place on Tuesday, September 29th for Preschool 3 – Grade 4 and Thursday, October 1st for Grades 5-8. Teachers will conduct their presentations in timed blocks that will be accessed via Google Classroom. A schedule will be published for each grade level detailing where you will need to "go" and what time you need to "go" there. You will simply need to click on a link for each time block according to your child's schedule. Back to School Night will begin at 7:00 pm both nights, be formatted into approximately 15 minutes blocks, and end at approximately 8:45 pm.
72. **School Supply Payments** – (*time to pay*) This week, finally, the remaining school supplies have come in. As a result, you will be receiving information on the required payment for each student's supplies very soon.
73. **Halloween** – (*"retro" plans for this year*) Looking toward October, Trunk or Treat and classroom Halloween Parties are canceled for this year due to the pandemic. Preschool 3 – Grade 4 will be invited to wear their Halloween costumes to school on October 30th, and we will have an "old-school" Halloween parade which will be broadcast via Facebook Live. Grades 5-8 will have a Halloween Dress down day – each homeroom will be invited to choose a theme and the students will be invited to dress according to that theme. **In a calendar change, this will be a 12:30 pm dismissal day.** I am not sure if buses will be available for dismissal; I need to confirm this.
74. **PTA Update** – (*please read the separate flyer*) Unfortunately, many of the traditional PTA activities will not be able to occur for the next few months. Still, our dedicated PTA has not stopped looking for ways to support the school and service its students in creative ways. Please see the separate flyer.
75. **Extended Day Program (EDP)** – (*Not yet*) All of the challenges to restarting EDP that I have detailed previously remain. Furthermore, the results of the EDP use survey revealed limited interest for the resumption of EDP at this time. While I recognize that EDP is a critical need for some families, we are not able to resume the program at this time. We will reevaluate the situation at the end of October and send another survey at that time.

Current Wish List

[Donations toward Penn Medicine arrival screening](#) -OR-

[St. Gregory the Great Academy Wish List](#)

(updated as needs develop)