

RCDS@home

**Online learning and continued
community in unparalleled times**

by Lori Ferguson

Rye Country Day School has long prided itself on providing students with “a challenging educational experience that combines intellectual mastery with real-world perspective.” That mission has been put to the test since March 11, when RCDS administrators learned that all New York schools would be closing in an effort to contain the spread of COVID-19, the disease caused by the novel coronavirus that has led to a global pandemic.

The mandate set in motion a series of steps that led to the creation of *RCDS@home*, a dynamic online learning environment that has allowed RCDS to continue the mission of educating students and cultivating a sense of community during these unparalleled times.

THE SETTING CHANGES, BUT THE MISSION ENDURES

As Headmaster Scott Nelson watched news of the pandemic unfold in early March, he understood that circumstances could change quickly. "In my 27 years at RCDS, we've had six other virus scares, so I knew the situation would be fluid," he says. Mr. Nelson was not the only one watching and worrying as the situation developed. Meeting to make plans for the faculty's June Professional Development session, Eliza McLaren, Director of Strategic Initiatives & Marketing, and Katie O'Shaughnessey, Director of Academic Technology, found themselves unable to think about anything but the possibility of a school closure. "Both of us had seen reports from international schools and had started researching their continuity plans for moving to an online teaching environment," recalls Ms. O'Shaughnessey. The two soon found themselves formulating a plan for RCDS. "About an hour and a half in, we emailed [Assistant Head of School and Middle School Principal] Meredith deChabert to tell her what we were doing and to confirm that we were not doubling work that others had done. She said we were not and encouraged us to keep going." Fortunately, the School was already well-positioned to go virtual, McLaren notes. A number of years ago, Rye Country Day had moved to a learning management system (LMS) called Haiku that would allow the institution the flexibility to continue off-site learning for a short period of time, such as a snow day, if necessary. This is the first time, however, that the LMS has been utilized for a longer term school closure.

In the two weeks remaining before the March 14th onset of March Break, every faculty member also received a refresher course on Haiku. "Our faculty has been using this system for more than a decade to share handouts and lessons with students—RCDS has always been ahead of the curve on the use of LMS," says Ms. O'Shaughnessey. "But we knew that if we were forced to shift to an online learning environment, teachers would be using the portal exclusively, so we wanted to ensure that everyone was up to speed."

Mr. Nelson also assembled an *RCDS@home* leadership team that reflected the signature mix of technological, academic, and community-based leadership that characterizes the RCDS

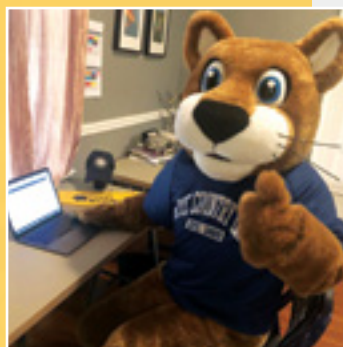
RCDS@home Upper School Student Schedule					
	Monday April 27	Tuesday April 28	Wednesday April 29	Thursday April 30	Friday May 1
Daily instructions will be posted to Haiku by 8:00 a.m. each day					
9:30 - 10:25	A	E	D	H	Advisory
10:25 - 10:30	Break				
10:30 - 11:25	B	F	C	G	English classes: Health 10 1095 Art classes: Theater 10, AP 10 Science classes: Biology 1005
11:25 - 12:20	Break				
12:20 - 12:25	C	G	B	F	Class Meetings
12:25 - 1:00	Lunch + Break				
1:00 - 1:55	D	H	A	E	English classes: American Advanced Topics in Theater 1:45-1:55
2:00 - 3:00	After school: Flexible Time (Staff and teachers will report the times that they are available for small group sessions, one-to-one connection, counseling, etc.)				
OPTIONAL OFFERINGS					
2:30 p.m.	Music Production - DJ Skills Workshop with Mr. Fraz-Roy	2:30 p.m. Check in - chat with Ms. Rivera and Mr. Adreanovs	2:30 p.m. Wellness Wednesday: Mindful Eating, Savor the Flavor	2:30 p.m. US student all-community read aloud	2:30 p.m. Workshop for US students only
3:00 p.m.	2:30 p.m. Bake custom cookies with Ms. Hallen	2:30 p.m. Bake custom cookies with Ms. Hallen	3:00 p.m. Read & Breathe: The Invisible String	3:00 p.m. Wildcat Workshop for entire RCDS community	3:00 p.m. All School Zoom Dance Party with Ms. Zanon!

RCDS@home Grade 5 Student Schedule					
	Monday April 27	Tuesday April 28	Wednesday April 29	Thursday April 30	Friday May 1
8:15 - 8:45		Gr. 5 P.E.			
9:30 - 10:20	G	I	G	I	Computer 5G + SEEK 5R + Chorus I + Band I
10:20-10:30	Break and Stretch				
10:30 - 11:20	R	T	R	T	Computer 5R + SEEK 5I + Chorus T + Band G
11:20-11:30	Break and Stretch				
11:30 - 12:20	Study Skills with Mrs. Cartwright	Office Hours/Flex Time: Staff and teachers will report the times that they are available for small group sessions, one-to-one connection, counseling, etc.			Computer 5I + SEEK 5T + Chorus G + Band R
12:20 - 1:00	Lunch + Break				
1:00 - 2:00	Spanish W (2) + French Z (4) + Art Y (1) + Art Z (3)	Spanish X (1) + Shop Z (2) + Shop X (3) + Art W (4)	All MS Advisory Period	Spanish Y (3) + Shop W (1) + Shop Y (4) + Art X (2)	Computer 5T + SEEK 5G + Chorus R + Band I
2:00-2:30	Grade 5 Dean Chat with Mr. O'Callaghan + Ms. Donahue	Grade 5 Book Club	Drama Z (1) + Drama W (3)	Drama Y (2) + Drama X (4)	Check SEEK Haiku page
OPTIONAL OFFERINGS					
2:30-3:00	2:30 p.m. Music Production - DJ Skills Workshop with Mr. Fraz-Roy	2:30 p.m. Bake custom cookies with Ms. Hallen	2:30 p.m. Wellness Wednesday: Mindful Eating, Savor the Flavor		
3:00 PM			3:00 p.m. Read & Breathe: The Invisible String	3:00 p.m. US student all-community read aloud	3:00 p.m. All School Zoom Dance Party with Ms. Zanon!
				4:00 p.m. Wildcat Workshop for entire RCDS community	

RCDS@home Fourth Grade Student Schedule					
	Monday April 27	Tuesday April 28	Wednesday April 29	Thursday April 30	Friday May 1
8:30-8:45	Log on/check assignments and feedback				
8:45-9:15	Sync Learning		Guest Author Zoom 8:45-9:45	Sync Learning	
9:15-9:30	Math Independent Assignments: WB			Math Independent Assignments: UKL	Math Independent Assignments: WB
9:30-9:45	Social Studies			Social Studies	
9:45-10:15	Snack/Break				
10:15-10:45	Independent Reading Assignments				PE/Zoom
10:45-1:00	Lang. Arts Skill Practice: UKL		Lang. Arts Skill Practice: SEARS		WEP
11:00-11:30	Library Zoom	French/Spanish Zoom	Science Zoom	Computer	French/Spanish Zoom
11:30-12:30	Lunch/Move				
12:30-1:00	Art	Science	Computer Zoom	Art Zoom	Music Zoom
1:00-1:30	Sync Learning		Math Independent Assignments: WB	Sync Learning	
1:30-2:00	Writing/Read Response				
2:00-2:30	Precision Project Work				
2:30-3:00	PE/Office Hours/Optional Community Event			PE/Zoom	Office Hours

These schedules provide a glimpse into a week in the life of RCDS students during *RCDS@home*. What set *RCDS@home* apart from other distance learning programs was the abundance of synchronous academic and community opportunities for students in all three divisions. During their time learning at home, students experienced the student-faculty connection that characterizes the Rye Country Day experience. This was crucial in developing the remote learning plan.

In addition to a thoughtful balance of synchronous classes and asynchronous activities each week, students were able to meet with deans, teachers, and counselors in small groups or one-on-one during daily office hours. The goal was to ensure that students received the same attention and support virtually that they do when they are on campus.



experience. In addition to Ms. McLaren and Ms. O’Shaughnessey, Mr. Nelson tapped Dr. deChabert, Lower School Principal Barbara Shea, Upper School Principal Jon Leef, Director of Health & Wellness Priya Singhvi, Director of Diversity & Inclusion Ali Morgan, and Director of Public Purpose Rebecca Drago.

On March 11, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo announced that all schools would be closed through April 1 (and the closures were subsequently extended through the end of the academic year). “Although we hoped for the best, we had a sense that the shutdown would be extended incrementally beyond that date,” says Mr. Nelson. “Since the campus was already scheduled for closure for our two-week March Break, we decided to use that period to get *RCDS@home* up and running.”

The team met for the first time on March 14 and identified three critical components for *RCDS@home*: safety, access to technology, and continuity of community. “A huge piece of our early work centered around equity—above all, we wanted to make sure our students and their families were safe,” says McLaren. “We also wanted to ensure that every student had access to a laptop, iPad, and Wi-Fi. And finally, we wanted to be certain that we honored the sense of community that’s such an integral part of Rye Country Day School.”

In formulating guidelines for *RCDS@home*, team members sought advice and guidance from respected peer institutions and colleagues across the country and around the world. “We heard from independent school colleagues on the West Coast and in international schools who had between a three-week and two-month lead on us in dealing with this crisis,” says Mr. Nelson. “They shared their insights and experiences on what worked ... and what did not.” Mr. Nelson also drew on information made available through listservs run by the National Association of Independent Schools and the New York State Association of Independent Schools. On March 30, *RCDS@home* went live.

ACROSS THE COMMUNITY, LEARNING CONTINUES

The weeks since were a time of learning and growth, not only for students, but also for the faculty, staff, and families that support them. “Faculty really had to think about what course content is most important and how to deliver it effectively,” notes Mr. Nelson. “They interacted with students in new ways and experienced a great deal of professional growth in a compressed time frame. And at the same time, everyone was also dealing with the personal challenges that this pandemic has created.” Still, Mr. Nelson observes, everyone pulled together to deliver on the School’s mission. “It was truly inspiring to see how committed teachers are to this school,” agrees Ms. McLaren. “Many teachers and administrators gave up their March Break to make sure that we were prepared to transition to online learning when school resumed at the end of March.”

Balancing the need to respect the faculty’s vacation and simultaneously give them the chance to master the tools they

would need to teach online was tricky, Ms. O’Shaughnessey concedes. “Our team worked very hard to be sensitive to the experiences of faculty and students,” she explains. “Trying to serve people in such a difficult moment is complicated. Some families were not impacted overly much, while others experienced tremendous challenges. Some members of our community live with healthcare providers, others have young children at home, and others had family members who were ill. For these families, any expectations with respect to *RCDS@home* had the potential to be overwhelming, so we made a concerted effort to strike a tender balance when implementing this initiative.”

Ms. McLaren admits there were a few growing pains, but says that overall, the transition to online learning was a positive one. “Change does not usually happen quickly in schools as long established as ours, so the rapid transition to an exclusively online learning environment *did* stretch our intellectual muscles,” she admits with a chuckle. “For example, Upper School faculty have been working on an intentional and thoughtful transition to a block schedule for quite some time now, but after transitioning to *RCDS@home*, we realized adjustments had to be made immediately; we changed the entire schedule in two days.” Yet through it all, Ms. McLaren adds, education continued. “The amount of connected learning time that students got with teachers and classmates is remarkable.”

RCDS students were amazing, as well, asserts Ms. O’Shaughnessey. “Our kids have great tech backgrounds, and they used the technology with fervor to reach their academic goals, as well as do good within the School and the community at large.” Students showed an amazing ability to think outside the box in terms of maintaining connections, she continues. “For example, athletic teams met virtually and did team building exercises, and clubs gathered online to cull the best ideas on how to maintain community.”

Although she concedes the pace and scope of change were profound, Ms. O’Shaughnessey also found the collision of the online world and academic world exciting. “Adults were in social media spaces more than ever, and it was interesting to see how teachers leveraged technology to facilitate learning in their classrooms. Faculty are constantly striving to master new technology tools through online workshops and webinars—their dedication was and continues to be remarkable.”

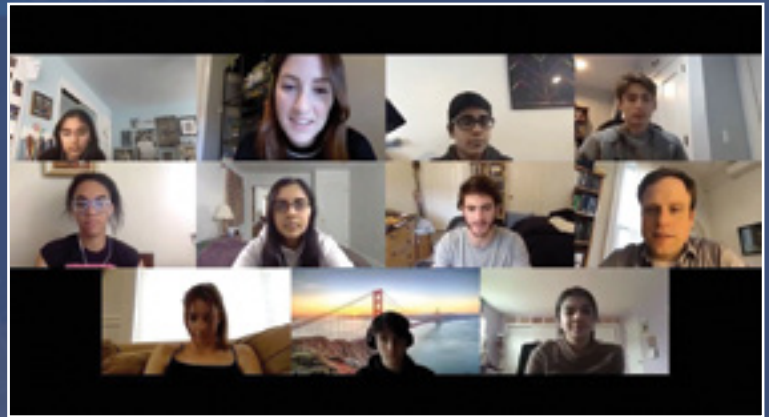
It was inspiring to see the commitment of the faculty every step of the way, agrees Ms. McLaren. “Our teachers are the key,” she asserts. “They’re the reason that people choose this school, and they’re incredible.” Ms. McLaren adds, “RCDS parents and guardians were also essential and inspiring partners in this. We recognize that distance learning requires more parent support than before, especially for our younger students, and our parents’ patience, investment, and partnership were critically important.”

FROM A DISTANCE, CONNECTIONS GROW

Although skills and knowledge development are a vital part of the RCDS experience, they are not the only learning outcomes that the School strives to achieve. Character, citizenship, and community



Third grade students concluded their discussion of The Boston Tea Party with their own Zoom “Tea Party” hosted by Ms. Aventuro and Ms. Hauben. Students attended the party with tea or a beverage of their choice and homemade cookies, which were part of a fractional math activity that doubled as a lesson on baking colonial oatmeal cookies. They also shared Boston Tea Party poems and answered trivia questions like: What group, led by Samuel Adams, was responsible for the Boston Tea Party?



Upper School Science Research students in Ms. Doran’s class had the opportunity to meet with Dr. Chris Mason from Weill Cornell Medical College. They talked about everything from navigating a career in science to his computational biology research in the NASA Twin Study and his recent work researching the presence of the novel coronavirus in the NYC subway and cities around the world.



Inspired by the *New York Times* compilation “17 Artists Capture a Surreal New York From Their Windows,” Ms. Keown and Ms. Behar asked their Middle and Lower School students to look out their own windows and create art based on what they saw. The resulting pieces were thoughtful and evocative paintings and drawings. “The students settled into their time at home and looked out their windows to witness the stillness and capture the emotion it stirs,” said Ms. Keown. “They have inspired me to pause as I look out my window and notice what I had overlooked before. I am thankful for being able to see into a part of their world.”



Middle School students in Ms. Huang’s class logged on to Zoom in Earth Week green as part of a school-wide virtual celebration of the 50th Anniversary of Earth Day. The week-long celebration included Zoom seminars at the Rye Nature Center, virtual hikes guided by Ms. Southard, and a sustainable cooking demonstration, among many others.



Eleventh and twelfth grade students in Ms. Everett and Mr. Sliter’s Economics and Politics class had a special visit from City of Rye Mayor Josh Cohn who discussed the COVID-19 pandemic and the role of local governments in crisis response.

wellbeing are also critical components of a Rye Country Day School education, and Director of Public Purpose Rebecca Drago, Director of Diversity and Inclusion Ali Morgan, and Director of Health & Wellness Priya Singhvi were determined to encourage their continued cultivation through *RCDS@home*. A faculty member at the Global Online Academy for six years prior to joining RCDS, Ms. Singhvi is well acquainted with the opportunities and challenges inherent to online learning. “As humans, we’re wired for connection and belonging,” she explains, “so as we were creating *RCDS@home*, we were mindful of finding ways to help community members strike a thoughtful balance between learning and maintaining their physical and emotional wellbeing.”

Ms. Singhvi instituted initiatives to keep members of each community constituency engaged mentally and physically during online learning. With respect to students, for example, she says a conscious decision was made not to begin online classes before 9 a.m. because research has shown that developing adolescent brains experience a delay in wakefulness. “Students were getting more rest, which is beneficial to their health,” she observes. Ms. Singhvi also encouraged the implementation of the 30/90/10 rule. “I suggested that every 30 minutes, we move at least 10 feet, for 90 seconds,” she says. Class schedules were adjusted to reflect feedback from students as well. “When students told us that they were becoming fatigued from so much screen time, we implemented breaks between every class for Grades 5 through 12.”

Ms. Singhvi also introduced a variety of non-academic health and wellness initiatives led by RCDS faculty and staff to encourage social interactions outside the virtual classroom: on Mondays, Fitness Bootcamp; on Tuesdays, a Total-Body workout; on Wednesdays, Yoga; on Thursdays, a ‘Check In and Chat’ and an affinity group for teachers with young children at home; and on Fridays, informal community hours for faculty. Ms. Singhvi also hosted virtual ‘Wellness Wednesdays’ for the entire community, leading weekly meditation and mindfulness experiences, as well as ‘Read and Breathe’ activities, bake-alongs, and workouts.

“In the past, I think many people felt that health and wellbeing were nice but not necessary. Before the pandemic, there were those who viewed self-care as selfish or indulgent. But now, I think everyone realizes self-care and human connection are essential if you wish to thrive. People can only show up as their best selves when they prioritize their health and wellbeing. These elements are not optional—they’re the foundation upon which everything rests.” And during *RCDS@home*, people rose to the challenge, says Ms. Singhvi. “Faculty and staff rallied together and responded so positively to requests for assistance in creating community health and wellness initiatives for *RCDS@home*. The amount of gratitude for the RCDS community is overwhelming, and I think it will continue to grow.”

Keeping the School’s motto, *Not for Self, but for Service*, at the core of *RCDS@home*, Director of Public Purpose Rebecca Drago coordinated a series of community public purpose initiatives, engaging students in efforts to make masks for local hospitals and write gratitude notes to healthcare and essential workers. She and Director of Diversity and Inclusion Ali Morgan also teamed up to

ensure numerous opportunities for students to connect and for the greater RCDS community to remain vibrant and active during *RCDS@home*. Ms. Singhvi was grateful for the health and wellness benefits of service learning and community engagement as well. “Compassion is empathy in action, and it keeps us from feeling burned out in a time of heightened stress. Studies show that being ‘other oriented’ can increase positive wellbeing and give you a sense of purpose,” she says.

“I’m immensely proud that the School fulfilled its mission and provided students with an education and a continuing sense of community,” Ms. O’Shaughnessey observes. “We never sought to be an online school—that’s not our mission. Everything we did was a crisis response, but this challenge is one that our community met with unparalleled excellence.”

Ms. O’Shaughnessey readily admits that not all pedagogy lends itself to technology, but she insists that RCDS faculty demonstrated unbelievable passion and determination in learning everything they could to deliver a rewarding online experience for students. “It was incredible to see teachers who’ve never used technology in the classroom relearning their pedagogy under extreme circumstances and learning to teach entirely online in just two weeks,” she notes. “What an amazing model for students in how to adapt and overcome adversity.”

Assistant Head of School Dr. deChabert is grateful—and not at all surprised—that the community rose to the challenge. “It’s still RCDS, and our commitment to educating students through *RCDS@home* was as strong as our commitment to teaching them face-to-face on campus,” she says. “Everyone at the School is determined to maintain our standard of excellence—the RCDS stamp is on everything we do.”

But this work takes a village, Dr. deChabert is quick to add. “Everyone sacrificed time and energy to make *RCDS@home* a success, not only faculty and staff, but also families and students.” It took everyone a couple of weeks to adjust to the new paradigm, she concedes, but the response was overwhelmingly positive. “It’s clear that the School is seen as a source of community and a central point of connection for everyone, and everyone was committed to doing their best for the students.”

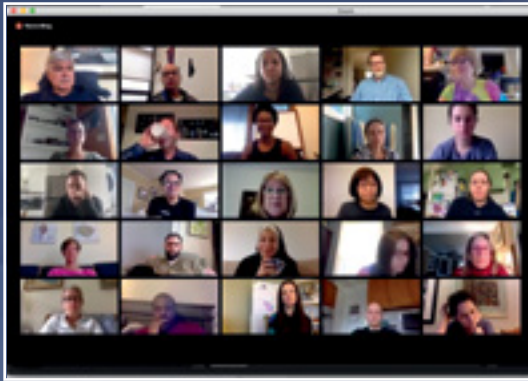
The commitment of the faculty was extremely inspiring, agrees Ms. McLaren. “The pace of change accelerated tremendously, but the entire faculty got on board with new styles of teaching while also maintaining their commitment to content coverage.” Despite facing a massive learning curve, teachers embraced the challenge with energy and enthusiasm, she continues. “I don’t see us ever completely going back to old ways of teaching. We’ve learned a lot about the efficacy of our schedules and modes of teaching that will inform our program moving forward. Before this happened, I wouldn’t have thought it possible that community could be replicated virtually, but it happened,” says Ms. McLaren.

Headmaster Scott Nelson concurs. “Ultimately, it’s the people at Rye Country Day who make the School,” he concludes. “Although we would have much preferred to be together in person, we still delivered on our mission. And out of challenge comes opportunity.”



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—Headmaster Scott Nelson



Faculty gathered frequently to share best practices and develop new, innovative approaches to teaching and connecting during RCDS@home.



RCDS@home Leadership Team (From top, left to right): Upper School Principal Jon Leef, Director of Strategic Initiatives & Marketing Eliza McLaren, Assistant Head of School and Middle School Principal Meredith deChabert, Lower School Principal Barbara Shea, Director of Academic Technology Katie O’Shaughnessey, Headmaster Scott Nelson, Director of Health and Wellness Priya Singhvi, Director of Public Purpose Rebecca Drago, and Director of Diversity and Inclusion Ali Morgan

To learn more about RCDS@home and to view highlights from distance learning at Rye Country Day, please visit www.ryecountryday.org/rcdsathome