Denver day schools stream along
Quick adaptation to coronavirus has all the students learning, though it’s not the same

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Despite the profusion of “new normals” imposed upon civilization by the coronavirus pandemic, it’s remarkable how the normality thereof still is. Technology — much of which did not exist a decade ago, or less — is making lots of things possible for those who don’t want to contract or spread the potentially deadly virus. Business transactions and conferences, official advisories, medical consultations, religious rituals, social interaction and many other activities are being conducted remotely, using digital technology that allows one to hear and see fellow human beings without actually being in each other’s presence.

Even education — perhaps especially education — is thriving ahead in stubborn defiance of the biological threat.

In the few weeks that the virus has toppled many quotidian routines, teachers and students alike have adapted to learning in new and innovative ways, gathering in virtual classrooms from the physical safety of their own homes.

Using laptop computers, tablets or cell phones, students from kindergarten to postgraduate levels are doing their best to keep up with their lessons. Denver’s Jewish day schools are doing their best to keep up with the new normal.

All of them, regardless of religious orientation, are conducting remote learning in one form or another, the INTERMOUNTAIN-JEWISH NEWS has learned as it followed the past week. While most of their educators agree that remote learning is not an absolutely satisfactory substitute for traditional classrooms, it’s a whole lot better doing nothing.

Here’s what these educators had to say about how they’re coping with the new reality.

The new reality.

While most of their educators agree that remote learning is not an absolutely satisfactory substitute for traditional classrooms, technology defies necessary technology and finalize plans,” he says. “We are hopeful, and we would love, to be able to return to school after Passover or May 1,” she says. “That will depend on government and health department recommendations and mandates for schools.”

In DJDS’ upper division — grades six through 12 — Snyder says Google is providing the educational programs of choice.

The transition was eased by the fact that all of DJDS’ upper division students already had laptops or Chromebooks, obviating the need for the school to provide the platforms.

“There are two parts,” he says. “Teachers are meeting live with students using Google Meet. They are also pushing work out to students via Google Classroom.”

The Google Meet technology allows students not only to interact with their teachers but with each other, Snyder indicates.

“We are trying to hold to the same environment,” Stroll says. “All teachers are conducting classes from their homes.”

The same uncertainty hangs over the school’s plans for graduation this year.

“We are hopeful that upper division seniors are going to be able to have a different learning environment. Everything we do in a classroom cannot be exactly duplicated in a remote learning environment. This is also allowing us to explore some new ways of doing content,” Stroll says.

Lower division teachers are using Zoom for live synchronous sessions and many other learning platforms, although some older students are having problems with the technology.

“We are about seven days in and are surveying faculty and parents to see what is working and where we can improve. We will continue to assess student learning,” says Stroll, who uses the phrase “distant learning” to describe what DJDS is doing. “We are following all orders given by the state.”

The same uncertainty hangs over the school’s plans for graduation this year.

“We’d like to,” she says when asked whether DJDS will graduate its students on schedule, “but again, we will continue to take our lead from the state.”

DAT’s Judaics principal Rabbi Dani Rockoff echoes the uncertainty.

“We plan to continue the program until we go back to school. At least officially, we are set to go back after Passover break, but we’ll obviously have to see how things develop.”

The school’s approach to technology is very similar to that employed by DJDS. Students have access to video and audio interaction with their teachers and one another.

“Our teachers are using Google Meetings and Zoom, creating presenters for instruction, and working in both a synchronous and asynchronous fashion,” Stroll says. “All teachers are conducting classes from their homes.”

Rabbi Rockoff elaborates. “For lower school (K-5) there is a mix of synchronous and asynchronous learning. Teachers meet their classes live on Zoom or Google Hangouts and interact with the class and allow for some socialization. Teachers also prepare videos in advance that students can watch that present instruction.

“Classwork and materials are maintained on the Google Classroom platform. Six through 12th grade has full class periods of 40 minutes that are synchronous using either Zoom or Google Hangouts.”

In both general and Judaic studies at DAT, Stroll and Rabbi Rockoff say, teachers are holding to their original curricula as much as possible.

It was necessary for the school to help out a significant number of students who needed devices in order to participate in the remote learning program, Stroll says.

“We distributed all of the devices we had on hand through our K-12th grades. Some students are using their own devices.

Students in fifth and higher grades, Rabbi Rockoff adds, already had Chromebooks assigned to them before the virus struck.

“These students took their devices home,” he says. “In lower grades, we took a survey of families to assess the number of devices they each had in their houses. We tried to supplement with what we have at school.”

The rabbi gives relatively high marks to how well the remote learning method is working at DAT.

“This has been an efficient and effective model overall,” he says. “The overwhelming feedback has been positive from students and parents. The interaction with a teacher and peers cannot take place as in a real live classroom. However, the virtual model, especially under the circumstances, provides structure, growth and learning in new ways of doing things that are well suited to a remote learning environment.”

Denver Academy of Torah embarked on remote learning on March 16 and has no idea how long it will last, head of school Lis Stroll said last week.

“We cannot make that determination.”
Teachers are working harder than ever

Hillel Academy of Denver has moved into the world of remote learning somewhat tentatively; its principal, Rabbi Yisroel Goldbaum, told the IN last week that the school made the move into remote learning on March 18. "Teachers are using Zoom, teleconferencing and teacher-recorded lessons," said Rabbi Schwab, indicating that the approach allows for full virtual interaction between students and teachers.

Suggesting that young people in the Jewish community are already up-to-date in terms of digital technology — at least to some degree — the rabbi said that Beth Jacob did not find it necessary to provide any devices or programs to its students. They were already prepared to enter the world of remote learning. For the duration, Rabbi Schwab says, the school plans to stick with its original curriculum. Whether it will be able to graduate its students on schedule, he said, is "yet to be determined."

At present, the school is pleased with how its remote learning program is working. "It can never compare with face-to-face teaching," Rabbi Schwab says. "However, under the circumstances, we would rate it from fair to very good." He adds that Beth Jacob did not find it necessary to provide any devices or programs to its students. They were already prepared to enter the world of remote learning.

Variety of communication media: Google Meet, Zoom, Google Classroom, Google Hangouts, teleconferencing, et. al.

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The New Jersey-based PAC is a right-leaning pro-Israel group, taking its cues from AIPAC and groups to that lobby's right. NORPAC can directly deliver only a legal maximum of $10,000 per candidate, but it has an influence because its endorsements are a guide for donors in the mainstream pro-Israel community.

Last week, when asked about NORPAC, Chouake wanted to talk about the coronavirus pandemic. The urgency that routinely attaches to political messaging in the pro-Israel sector had receded and the overwhelming tone was of deference to a legislative system that is grappling with a historic crisis. Lobbyists are holding back — in part due to the fact that much of what they do involves face-to-face meeting.

"The double challenge is no one is processing the flush, you don't want to meet in groups," Chouake said, adding that NORPAC had canceled 11 meet-and-greets due to the pandemic. "And the stock market went from 29,000 to 18,000, and a lot of people are out of work. NORPAC's salons throughout the tri-state region of New York, New Jersey and Connecticut attract some of the pro-Israel realm's most dedicated givers and allows them to shuffle with candidates to pin them down on their views and to write checks. Recent honorees include Mikie Sherrill, the moderate New Jersey Democrat who flipped a Republican district in 2018, and Max Rose, the Jewish Staten Island Democrat who did the same, along with Rep. John Cornyn of Texas and Bill Cassidy of Louisiana.

Chouake is unfailingly charming and cheery, and loves to talk about Israel, legislation and congressional races. Now the charm was laced with a grimness. NORPAC has canceled its annual Washington lobbying day, even though it was scheduled for May 19.

Chouake was not optimistic that systems would be back to normal in two months, and his explanation stemmed more from his experience as a physician than as a lobbyist.

"What eventually happens is hospitals are overwhelmed with caring for people on respirators," he said. AIPAC spokesman Marshall Wittmann said that deference must be paid first to the overriding crisis of the coronavirus. "For all of our actions we go forward with that in mind," he said. Dyan Williams, J Street's vice president for governmental affairs, said the liberal Jewish Middle East lobby also was holding back.

"Right now our chief rule is law. We must work to protect and provide for their constituencies, and that comes first," he said. AIPAC did send out an action alert last week urging lawmakers to sign a letter to the Trump administration asking it to press the UN Security Council to reauthorize its embargo on Iran. But Wittmann pointed out that the issue is time-sensitive — the embargo lapses in October.

"We recognize our issues continue to be important as evidenced by Iranian-backed militia attacks [on UN targets in Iraq] this year," Wittmann said. "At the same time we have to seek a balance in how we approach members of Congress right now."

A top Democratic official in the US House of Representatives told this reporter that he had noticed the son who called reached out just to see how I was doing, which I thought was really thoughtful.

This official had seen the action alert on the Iran arms embargo, which he thought was appropriate because of the time-sensitivity, but said foreign policy simply was not on the horizon.

"We are 99% coronavirus right now and it is absolutely impossible to have a conversation about foreign policy when you're literally trying to save people's cars, houses, families, and I think these groups appreciate that," he said.

Williams, the J Street lobbyist, said his group has pivoted to assist congressional offices in constituent services.

"There are a number of offices that have constituents with kids overseas, on study abroad, that are working to try and get those folks home," he said.

"Sometimes offices are looking for help to connect to the right desk officer at State or an embassy, and we're happy to help. We want to be a resource, not a nudge."

The congressional official recalled with amazement how lobbyists not affiliated with Jewish groups came to his office.

"The meet the export" events that lobbyists have in congressional meeting rooms on the Hill are geared to educate congressional staffers and exchange contact information. For AIPAC and J Street, those have moved online. AIPAC last month launched teleconference briefings with a call on the current constitutional crisis affecting efforts in Israel to set up a government.

Chouake said he was looking into getting the meet-and-greets online. "We have to find a way to get them back, even if its on Zoom," he said.

Still, one method of influence continues unabated, Chouake said. "We have a very tried and true committed group of people who realize it's important, so they write the checks," he said.