



# Back to school perspectives

**W**ITH SO MANY OF US bracing for another round of virtual schooling this fall, *VTC* checked in with a couple obliging members of VML's Executive Committee who have some notable perspectives on the matter.

**Tommy Smigiel (City of Norfolk council member and high school principal) on equity, simplicity, and community.**

"Resilient" is the best word to describe our students, parents, and school systems while handling school closures and virtual learning since last March. Everyone was caught off guard in the Spring, but school systems across Virginia adapted quickly and worked to support teaching and learning as much as possible. We all hoped that the COVID numbers would be low enough for students to return physically across the Commonwealth, but persistently high rates in larger localities have led many school systems to make the hard decision to start the school year with 100% virtual learning. Even many localities with lower numbers have chosen a to start virtually to prevent breakouts. So, while we have all had more time to plan, schools, parents and students are still entering a world of unknowns. Simply put: We haven't tried to start school this way before.

As a principal of a high school with approximately 2,000 students, my biggest concern is for our equity and opportunity students. Equity and opportunity students are defined as English Language Learners (ELL), high-poverty, and special education students. The lack of technology including high-speed internet access, makes this group even more vulnerable to learning gaps. For all these reasons, equity must be at the top of any school system's list when it comes to planning virtual learning. After equity, concerns about stability and simplicity follow. Schools must work to ensure students are provided with the most stable type of learning possible. This will mean a mindset change for many educators who are used to a traditional approach to teaching and learning. It also means making things simple for students and their parents. Complex virtual learning will not be successful.

It is also important that communities come together to support their schools and families that having difficulties with technology and childcare. Now is the time for business leaders, church leaders, community leaders, those who are retired, and many others, to work with schools to help keep ALL our students educated. Business leaders need to allow employees more flexibility to work from home. Parents who may have not had the time or inclination to involve themselves with their kids' schools need to step up as well. It is very important to make sure your contact information is current with your schools and stay engaged as schools disseminate information.

Schools aren't just the places where kids come to learn. For a long time now, they are also the places where many kids get their best meal of the day, feel loved, and have a sense of belonging. Schools do a lot, but some of what they do simply cannot be replicated at a distance. I remain hopeful, that everyone will embrace the need to help the children and schools in their community during this challenging time. If you can help, please reach out to your local school today.







**Jon Stehle (City Fairfax council member and business analyst) on lessons learned by a family living, learning, and working under the same roof.**

In the June 2020 edition of *VTC*, a quotation from Michael Darcy, the recently retired executive director of the New Jersey State League of Municipalities, caught my attention. Commenting on what it means to be a local official, Mr. Darcy said: “They engage as local officials out of concern for their neighbors...It’s the ultimate in volunteering and caring for your neighbor. When we approach our challenges with that in mind it makes everything possible.”

These words reminded me of a conversation I had when I first took office as a council member. A veteran councilmember told me that council debates and challenges each other while considering an issue. Then council votes on it. After the vote is taken, we support the decision and work to make it the best we can for our community.

In July, Fairfax County Public Schools (which serve the City of Fairfax) announced they would begin the school year with 100% distance learning. My family of four learned back in the spring that living, learning, and working together in our small townhome was challenging and we were hoping we wouldn’t have to do it again this fall. But, as I learned from that veteran council member years ago,

now that the decision has been made to start with virtual learning, it is everyone’s job to support our community! And, like Mr. Darcy up in the Garden State, I am reminded that everyone in the Commonwealth involved in the process is doing their best to make it work for all.

And it is going to be different for everyone. As my wife noted early in this process, “We are not all in the same boat. We are in the same vast ocean of pandemic, riding in our own boats.” It is important to recognize that each community, family, and individual will struggle with different things, will find success in unexpected ways, and will come away with different lessons.

However, there are lessons we can learn from each other as we all navigate our boats safely to shore. Here are some things my family has learned so far. (Note – I am proud to share that my kids agreed to participate without requesting extra dessert!)

**Steph (aka Mom) – PhD Student.**

*I have learned is that I just need to ask for help. We have a wonderful network of family and friends who are willing and able to support us and our kids from afar. One of our relatives, a retired English teacher, has already volunteered to have a weekly Zoom session to answer any English related questions the kids have from their work that week. I need to learn to ask, and accept, help. That will be my biggest challenge this Fall.*

**Zoe – 6<sup>th</sup> Grader.** *I don’t think virtual learning will be that bad but I hope there are activities that require you to go for a walk, or do some exercises, or turn off your computer and write a story, or something like that. I liked how*

*our family set up a sticky note board where you put up a sticky note for each of your goals for the day and you could rip it off once you completed it. It felt good when you ripped it off! I hope we continue that this Fall.*

**Cooper – 3<sup>rd</sup> Grader.** *I feel like I have gotten used to virtual learning now. I hope we will still be able to do “fieldtrips” like we did last year. We went to websites and pretended to go on a field trip to the beach and looked at animals at the zoo. I want to get better at typing so I can be a fast typer [sic] and not have to look at the keys. This will help me use the chat box. I want Mom, Dad, and Zoe to not walk in front of my camera when I am in class.*

**Jon (aka Dad) –** *Back in the Spring, the loss of daily rhythms was hard to deal with. To get some of that back, this fall we are going to try having the kids put on their bookbags and take a walk around the neighborhood before school starts. Another challenge was providing each person a place to work in our tiny townhome that best fit their schedule for the day. To accommodate everyone, we have started a post-it notes “hot desk” system indicating where each of the four of us will be working for the day. This way, the kids know if I am on a video call at the kitchen table, it is OK to walk by even if they happen to wind up on camera – and my co-workers have embraced this new reality with me.*