COVID-19 Pivots
Parent Engagement in Student Learning

CONCORDIA LUTHERAN COLLEGE

When learning moved from the classroom to the dining room for the majority of Queensland students for part of Term 2, many parents and carers became engaged in their child’s education like never before. Learning became visible. Technology gave teachers and parents a front-row seat to each other’s roles and lives. Many parents, who were home during this period, experienced not only what their children were learning but also how they learned. School was the hot topic of family conversations. This type of engagement by families is what more than 50 years of research shows enhances student achievement and wellbeing.

The COVID-19 home learning period challenged, enriched and extended the partnerships between independent schools and parents in new ways.

Concordia Lutheran College shared its experiences, challenges, unexpected surprises and learnings from this time in a webinar on 27 July 2020 hosted by Independent Schools Queensland, the Queensland Independent Schools Parents Network and Griffith University.

The parents of Concordia Lutheran College’s 560 students gave the college a gold star for its approach to home learning.

Parents appreciated the school’s communication, live classes, online materials and weekly check-ins by staff on student and family wellbeing, according to parent feedback.

When the Prep to Year 12 Toowoomba school, which also offers boarding, switched to home learning, most students and families were already familiar with the school’s online platforms – Seesaw in the Junior College and Microsoft Teams in the Middle and Senior College.

Head of College Adrian Wiles says the school moved quickly to upskill the community on how it was going to use the platforms to deliver student learning programs.

“Parents in particular really enjoyed the fact that there was a lot of face-to-face activity through the platforms and parents who were at home could see this,” Mr Wiles says.

Year 3 teacher John Trappett, whose teaching repertoire includes visual art, created art videos for his students which he says also proved popular with parents.

“With primary students you have to be so much more engaging when you are teaching in front of the children; you are there and you can feed off them. But when they are all of a sudden removed from the equation, we had to get as creative as possible behind the scenes,” Mr Trappett says.

“Online learning taught us the value of flexible learning and allowed students and families freedom to choose when they worked, which subject areas they wanted to engage in first, all while embracing the ability to re-watch lesson content if they desired.”

“Seeing the teacher’s face and hearing their voice through the often-entertaining lesson videos, meant that students could still feel connected to their teacher and classmates through the different video link-ups which even included an online birthday party!”
Families were also supported with a wide range of additional activities, ideas and resources through the college’s new LOVE (Learning Online Virtual Education) CLC web space.

LOVE provided a wide range of engaging educational activities to complement a student’s classroom studies as well as wellbeing resources, and a social space where students, staff and parents could share photos from home or contribute images on different topics.

It also included a weekly wellbeing newsletter containing recipe ideas, recommended music, videos, activities and game ideas. The newsletter was so well received by parents the school is continuing it in Term 3.

Mr Wiles says prior to the COVID-19 pandemic the college’s engagement with parents had been quite formal revolving around “stand and deliver” information sessions or meetings.

However during the home learning period the school took many of its activities online, which not only opened them up to more families, such as boarding parents, but gave them a more relaxed and informal feel.

P&F meetings are now virtual and the school’s open day will also run online.

Head of Mathematics Karin McKenzie says the college now uses its online platforms such as Microsoft Teams to keep families more involved and in touch with the progress and status of their child’s learning.

“We were in their homes and they were in our classrooms,” Ms McKenzie says.

“During the home learning period we may have been on a Teams meeting with a student and their parent may have been in the room and could lean in to see us interacting or to ask a question,” she says.

“We’ve gone from a very formal environment of parent-school interactions to one that’s less formal.

I have parents who will now email and say ‘can I please have a Zoom or a Teams meeting?’ That’s something that wouldn’t have happened in the past. We’ve built some incredible relationships.

“This has created a new normal and a new standard of availability between parents and teachers.”

Mr Wiles says many parents have a newfound respect for the role, expertise and efforts of their child’s teachers because they witnessed teaching first-hand.

“Parents made morning teas for teachers and have gone out of their way to praise staff for the hard work they put in. It’s important that we maintain and build on that level of goodwill, respect and partnership.”

One of those parents is Eakraj Adhikari, father of a Year 2 and Year 7 student. He describes the teachers at Concordia as “heroes” and a critical pillar in the nation’s response to COVID-19.

Mr Adhikari, who also worked from home during the lockdown period, says seeing the work of teachers first-hand was an “eye opener”.

He says the college provided incredible learning and wellbeing support to his children and family with some teachers devising learning activities that also included parents.

“I feel like Concordia is part of my family. As parents it’s important that we show appreciation as much as we can. We need to acknowledge and respect our teachers.”

Mr Wiles says while the home learning period reinforced the importance of face-to-face learning in a safe and structured environment, it also revealed the opportunities for blended models of learning, particularly for regional and remote boarding students.

“We need to take those lessons with us to plan for the future. We can now be smarter about it because we’ve all experienced it.”