

Rim of the World distance learning: the good, the bad, the ugly

By **ZEV BLUMENFELD**
Staff Writer

With the Rim of the World Unified School District having implemented 100 per cent remote learning for this school year, 95 students have opted into the district’s Home Choice program – as detailed in the Sept. 10 issue - leaving most students to take part in the district’s distance learning program.

Unlike Home Choice, in which children meet with a teacher once per week, distance learning more closely resembles a typical school year. Students attend daily classes, adhering to a fixed schedule.

The district implemented distance learning in March when COVID-19 safety measures began. At the time, students lacking the means or choosing to skip the virtual classes were told it would not adversely impact their grades. Some students joined Zoom lessons with their teacher, others participated in family-oriented learning activities and some did neither.

Amber Crubaugh — mother of an elementary, middle and high schooler — enrolled her children in distance learning this fall.

“I felt like my kids were on break [during the spring semester],” Crubaugh said. Her hope — like the other families interviewed — was that, come the fall semester, the school district would institute a more cohesive distance learning curriculum.

All families interviewed said they feel the fall semester is going better than the spring. However, most families consider the rollout to have been problematic and turbulent.

In May, the district sent surveys to families, asking whether they preferred distance learning, in-person classes or a hybrid model. The district reported that over 55 percent of families requested in-person learning. Subsequently, they planned to open.

On July 17, a state mandate thwarted any potential in-person schooling in the Rim of the World Unified School District. Families who had registered for in-person learning were automatically enrolled in distance learning.

“We had virtually two weeks to come up with the distance learning program,” said David Nygren, coordinator of alternative programs and principal at Mountain High School. “We had a contingency plan, but we didn’t put teeth into it.”

The change meant the district needed to complete their curriculum before the beginning of the school year on Aug. 13



Neva Hidajat works outdoors during her ceramic class. Distance learning allows kids the freedom to study in a comfortable setting.

— less than a month following the state’s announcement.

Too late to enroll in Home Choice, Crubaugh said she considered a home-schooling program but wanted to weigh her options.

“I wanted to see what kind of distance learning platform they were going to have,” she said. “But, by the time the school released its plan, I had waited too long and there was no available homeschooling program.”

Some parents felt the school district exercised poor foresight.

“They should have been planning for distance learning instead of planning to open,” said Stephanie Kritz, a mother of two elementary students. “I felt like they had to continue to scramble to put this plan in place for distance learning. They weren’t prepared. A lot of what I’m seeing on Facebook and other families that I heard from were very frustrated because we didn’t have information.”

TECH TROUBLE

A linchpin to distance learning is technology accessibility and fluidity. During the spring semester, school-issued Chromebooks were not made available.

At the time, Mark Warhol, a fifth-grade teacher at Valley of Enchantment mentioned nearly 50 percent of his class lacked either reliable high-speed Internet or computer access.

The district distributed Chromebooks and Wi-Fi hotspots for the fall semester. Registration began on July 23 and concluded on July 29, according to Superintendent Michelle Murphy. Distribution occurred on Aug. 11 and 13 — the day before and after the first day of school.

“We have a very limited supply of hotspots for our students,” Murphy stated. “Personal devices will not have access to the hotspot.”

This meant students owning personal laptops were unable to connect to school-issued hotspots.

Families described login, audio and video issues as well. Faulty Zoom meeting IDs meant students missed class. Some people experienced slow Internet speeds, making connecting impossible.

Problems like these prompted Crubaugh to create the Facebook group, Rim Distance Learning Support Group.

The technological learning curve has been another challenge for teachers and parents. The district did not give families any instruction about troubleshooting technology although a video tutorial was posted about Google Classroom on the district’s webpage.

“I wish they would have prepared their staff more and prepared parents just in case they would have had to go to distance learning,” Crubaugh said. “But I think most teachers are doing a phenomenal job.”

Though the district has reported no malware attacks, Crubaugh voiced concern about the possibility. Crubaugh said a friend took her kids off the Chromebooks completely after the malware attack within the Rialto Unified School District.



Nathan Hidajat studies in his room on the second day of school.

A SILVER LINING

Despite the rollout, a framework is in place.

Days are structured in two portions called synchronous and asynchronous learning. In primary through secondary school, synchronous learning occurs in the morning.

Neva Hidajat, a Rim High sophomore, said she attends three, 50-minute classes Tuesday through Friday. Mondays

are six periods, each 25 minutes long, in which the class usually reviews material from the past week.

Neva’s siblings — Nathan, a senior, and Nina, a seventh-grade student — stressed the importance of social interaction. Their teachers implement Zoom breakout rooms, giving students a chance to participate in group work with their peers.

“You’re still getting that social interaction while being safe,” Nina said. “It’s not that big of a change and not as hard of a change to adapt to as I expected.”



Seveneth-grader Nina studies through Zoom. (All photos courtesy of Lia Hidajat)

Zoom also features a Raise Your Hand button. When pressed, the web conferencing service transmits a notification to the teacher indicating a student has a question or comment.

“That makes it really easy and organized, so it’s not like everyone is chiming in at the same time,” Nathan said.

In the afternoon, asynchronous learning begins.

“Basically, it’s like office hours where students can ‘pop in’ any time they want and ask questions,” Nathan said. “Through the asynchronous time, students get a lot more of the one-on-one time with their teachers.”

Additionally, teachers administer quizzes and students use asynchronous time to complete homework.

“This is a new process and experience for everyone,” Neva said about the changes. “We all are human and we all need to learn.”

Her mother, Lia Hidajat, echoed Neva’s sentiment.

“For my children, I always want them to know how to be flexible,” she said. “There are tough times, life isn’t always easy, but we have to know how to adjust to circumstances and make the most of it.”

Editor’s note: For more on the Rim district’s distance learning program and how the district is preparing for eventual reopening, see the article in this issue on Superintendent Michelle Murphy’s presentation to the Crestline-Lake Gregory Rotary Club.

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