

EDUCATION

One school district says yes, it can offer a remote learning option for students

North Rockland is starting to get inquiries from other districts about how their remote option works.

Gary Stern Rockland/Westchester Journal News

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Story Highlights

Fiscal boom year allowed North Rockland to fund Remote Academy

Steven Buckenberger is part of a new class of teachers hired by the North Rockland school district to create something this fall that other school systems want no part of: a remote-learning option for students.

He's an all-remote Spanish teacher for grades 7-12 — one of 29 new teachers staffing North Rockland's "Remote Academy," which may be the only program of its kind in the Hudson Valley and beyond.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I'll take a digital hand," a headphones-wearing Buckenberger prompted one of his classes last week. He was sitting in his "classroom" at Fieldstone Middle School, a small office equipped with file cabinets, a couple of chairs, a case of water, and his students' faces on a computer screen.

"Isabella, you have your hand raised; take it away," the 25-year-old said. "Ok, what is a cognate? Tell us."

Remote learning defined the last year and a half of school life in New York, as most teachers had to become quickly proficient at teaching via camera and microphone. But this fall, with students in classrooms five days a week, school districts have been eager to drop remote learning like a college course that's way more trouble than it's worth.

Schools only hope that a return to remote learning won't be necessitated at some point by a new variant of COVID-19.

In North Rockland, though, officials began wondering in the spring what they could do if enough families wanted their kids, for whatever reasons, to continue all-remote education in September. Could they pull it off?

After hundreds of families responded affirmative to a survey in early August, Superintendent Kris Felicello and his staff decided to make it happen.

One reason for this commitment, Felicello said, was that the district wanted something positive to come from last year's frenetic switch to remote learning and everything that educators learned from going through it.

District officials asked themselves, he said, "What are the things in education we can do better because we were forced to do things different?"

A major undertaking

North Rockland opened its school year on Sept. 9 with 336 students in its Remote Academy, representing about 4% of the district's roughly 8,000 students. The total includes 230 students in grades K-6 and 106 in grades 7-12.

The district named former high school Assistant Principal James Mulligan as principal of the Remote Academy and hired 29 teachers, mostly youngsters with only student-teaching on their resumes, as remote-only educators.

School board strife: Elmsford meeting marked by name-calling, division

Metro-North: To continue discounted fares through end of the year

Halloween parades: At least two canceled

The new staff alone can't cover all subjects, though. So some classroom teachers will also teach academy students during periods when they don't have in-person classes. They include specialists like art and music teachers and high school teachers who teach electives.

No doubt, the Remote Academy is a major undertaking. It had to be created quickly during a summer of uncertainty because of rising COVID numbers. It will serve a relatively small number of students. And it's a considerable expense, costing the district as much as \$4 million in federal stimulus funds.

These are among the reasons that North Rockland appears to be the only district in the Hudson Valley to offer a full remote option this fall.

Many districts are offering some form of remote learning for students who are home on quarantine or have medical reasons for not being in school. But when it comes to the general student population, educators have insisted that it's time for all students to be back in school.

"We know a lot of districts wanted kids in school, and we do, too," Felicello said. "That being said, a remote option works better for some students and some families."

North Rockland officials said that most families who chose the Remote Academy did so because of a medically vulnerable person at home or because a student was anxious about returning to school or simply preferred remote learning.

"The families that committed to this really thought it through," said Anthony Zollo, the district's assistant superintendent for educational services.

Parents thrilled with option

Andrea Peligri was thrilled that her son, Carter, a high school junior, could attend the Remote Academy this year. He has type 1 diabetes and has not yet been vaccinated against COVID-19.

"Being forced to vaccinate him, I wasn't too comfortable with it yet," she said. "So, honestly, this has been a godsend for us. It's risky putting him in that (school) situation. We're very lucky. I know it's a lot of work, but it's great we have a district to do this."

Steven Collazo said it gives him peace of mind to know his son, Matthew, a 10th-grader, can start another year doing remote learning.

"When I heard North Rockland was going to continue remote learning, being the only one in the area to do it, I felt great," he said. "I'm really happy they stepped up. This way, Matthew can concentrate and focus on education without any distractions."

Families were asked to commit to half the school year in Remote Academy, at which point students can return to school if they choose. The district may take new students into the academy at the halfway point.

Felicello said that the district may well keep a remote option in place when the pandemic is over, if there is a demand for it. "There is a strong possibility," he said.

Notably, North Rockland is starting to get inquiries from other districts about how their remote option works.

Starting from scratch

Hiring a new staff in the middle of the summer was no easy task, especially when there is a shortage of teachers in some subject areas. So North Rockland turned mostly to candidates straight out of college, signing them to one- or two-year contracts.

The advantage is that they're tech-savvy and already taught remotely when doing their student-teaching in college. "It's kind of the only world they know," Felicello said. Plus, the district has told them that they are essentially trying out for longer-term positions.

"Remote Academy is a great idea and I love that they allow students and families to have a choice," said Danielle Thuman, 21, who is teaching first-graders. She did remote student-teaching in the Monroe-Woodbury school district last year while studying education at Mount Saint Mary College in Newburgh.

Thuman is one of three Remote Academy teachers who have taken over a small wing of the library at Fieldstone Middle School. Dividers separate their small workspaces, where they spend their days using mainframe computers and laptops to create a class-like experience for their students at home.

"You have to make sure your camera is on," Thuman tells one student. "I want to see you and hear from you. If I can't, it makes me sad."

Last week, the first full week of school, was mostly about getting her 6-year-olds to engage with their technology and their new teacher. Thuman tried different approaches, including having them dance to stay active.

"The goal is to have them independent, but working on the computer is hard for first-graders," she said. "Some parents help them out."

Mulligan, the principal, wants to give students the cohesive feel of being part of a school community. He does daily video announcements, "drops in" on remote classes, makes sure that technical glitches are quickly handled by staff, and oversees the outdoor distribution of school materials and meals to families. He also hopes to hold in-person events like an ice cream social for students and families.

"We want to keep them involved, depending on how comfortable they are doing it," he said.

All academy teachers work from the middle school or the district's central office. Officials wanted them to work together and support one another, which would be more difficult if they were teaching from their homes.

One of Thuman's library-mates, third-grade teacher Julia Michalak, spent one morning last week teaching the "base 10" number system. She urged her students to give her a digital thumbs up if they needed clarification. Then she asked them to step away from their computers for a bit to do some counting with manipulatives, or small blocks, that had been distributed by the district.

Michalak told students they could show their work by recording themselves and sending her a video clip.

"I know it's hard working at the computer all day, friends," she said.

Paying for it

North Rockland would not likely have considered a Remote Academy without a sharp turn in its financial fortunes.

The district had to make years of deep spending cuts after a devastating 2006 court decision forced it pay the largest tax refund in New York state history to the Mirant Corporation. The district's annual payments of \$11.1 million continue through 2037.

But 2020, against all odds, turned into a fiscal boom year for school districts with high poverty rates like North Rockland. About 60% of students come from families that are considered economically disadvantaged.

First, an empowered state Legislature decided to pay out \$4.2 billion over three years in education aid it said was owed to school districts. This year's state budget gave North Rockland a 24% increase in "foundation aid" to \$52.5 million.

Second, federal stimulus packages gave out vast sums to school districts with high concentrations of poverty. North Rockland is due to get \$21.8 million from the American Rescue Plan passed in March. These dollars will pay for the Remote Academy.

Considering how hard schools worked to make remote learning effective, starting from when schools first closed in March of 2020, some are surprised that schools are giving up so quickly on remote instruction.

In fact, a new poll by The Education Trust-New York, an organization that promotes educational equity, found that while 89% of New York parents believe that in-person instruction is ideal, 72% of Black parents, 69% of Hispanic parents and 55% of white parents said they would choose a remote option if it was available this fall.

"Remote learning is not going away — it is too early to abandon the planning and infrastructure development necessary to make remote learning successful," said Allison Lake, executive director of the Westchester Children's Association. "It may be premature given the current rate of vaccinations, testing rate, and growing list of more dangerous COVID-19 variants to expect that all students can safely learn at school."

A major lesson of pandemic education was the digital inequity that separates students and their families. Many urban districts needed months to get laptops and Wi-Fi hotspots to kids who didn't have the resources for at-home school.

The Westchester Children's Association, a nonprofit that promotes policies that help kids, fought last year to highlight the digital divide. The need to do so remains, Lake said.

"Decision-makers, elected officials, and educators have an opportunity presented by this pandemic to close the gap in digital access and create long-standing solutions for future generations," she said.

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