

Dear McLean Parents/Guardians:

Over the past few weeks, our students have been put into an unprecedented learning experience that we, the adults, have many questions about. This is not the typical education we experienced in our youth. The faculty at McLean High School wants you to know that we are committed to continuing your student's education through distance learning. We believe that if a student attends the weekly class sessions and completes the assignments, readings, videos, etc., then that student will be ready for the next year's course. We are also committed to sharing with you how our students are learning during this unique time.

Our teachers are preparing your students for next school year

To start, when we were informed that we would not be coming back to school for the remainder of the school year, teachers connected with other teachers on their curriculum teams to ensure that classes would continue to cover the required material. This required material is known as **essential knowledge**. Teachers created differentiated lessons that incorporate videos, readings, broader scope visible thinking routines, and targeted analysis type activities, just to name a few, that cover the curriculum as required by FCPS. Teachers also worked vertically, which means to connect with teachers of the same content area but in different grade levels, to ensure that students will be prepared with background knowledge that will enable them to be successful in the next level content area class.

Your student is prepared for distance learning

What has been described above is also called Blended Learning. Blended learning is a hybrid, flexible approach to education that allows students to learn at their own time, path, pace, and/or place. At McLean, we have been working for the past two years to incorporate Blended Learning techniques into our instruction. Because of this, students are already comfortable with a variety of technology-based instructional tools. The difference now is that we are *relying* on these tools instead of using them in an integrated approach.

Students should attend weekly class sessions for synchronous learning

Synchronous instruction is occurring via a schedule set by FCPS. Each class is meeting together with a teacher 45 minutes a week. In addition, there are weekly office hours wherein students can ask clarifying questions of teachers if they choose to attend. These synchronous sessions are critical to developing and sustaining rapport between the teacher and students. They also serve as an academic and social-emotional health check for students. In other words, synchronous sessions serve many purposes which *include* direct instruction, but instruction is not always the core purpose of this 'together' time.

Important distinctions between synchronous and asynchronous learning

Over the past few weeks parents have expressed questions and confusion about the difference between 'synchronous' and 'asynchronous' learning. This confusion makes sense to us since public education in FCPS looks completely different than it did two months ago. Distance learning consists of two distinct components: synchronous and asynchronous learning. The synchronous component can be likened to the tip of the iceberg. In other words, it is the most visible work students and teachers will do, and it is done at the same time, but it represents a very small part of the entire process. The asynchronous teaching and learning component represents the vast majority of the effort invested by students and teachers in distance learning.

During asynchronous instruction and learning, teachers plan and devise instruction that students will receive at their own place and pace. This instruction initiates a cycle through which students learn the content and practice it. Teachers then provide feedback on this process and the students learn from teacher feedback. Students then further practice while simultaneously layering on new instruction provided by the teacher. All of this can be done without having a teacher and student communicating at the same time (synchronously).

Our teachers are learning through distance learning

As instructors, we have had to put aside our traditional teaching practices and incorporate new ways, not only to teach our students, but to engage them in lessons. This is not happening without struggles. Teachers report that while in their synchronous session, it is difficult to read students' understanding, provide quick and meaningful feedback, and try to get students to participate in discussions. They are also working on creating materials and lessons that students can learn while at home. Yes, there have been challenges, but there are also many positives. Teachers report that this is making them better teachers because now they have to review lessons and ensure that each one is meaningful, engaging, and essential. Lastly, teachers have been more unified than ever before. They are working collaboratively with curriculum teams to ensure your student is prepared for this course and for the upcoming course.

Your students are learning through distance learning

What we are discovering is that, without the stress of grades, students are free to focus on *learning*, and not on the grade. Students have expressed this exact sentiment as they have said this is the first time they have felt enabled to explore their interests in the class on their own time and at their own pace. Since this blended learning approach also incorporates real world application, students can apply what they are learning to situations outside of the classroom creating a deeper understanding of the essential knowledge.

Life-long skills our students are learning during distance learning

The unprecedented circumstances our students are now facing are providing them with natural opportunities to develop a wide range of problem-solving skills, coping strategies, and tools to handle challenges they will face throughout their lifespan. Distance learning requires our students to be resilient and to make sure they are taking time for self-care. They will be confronted with new and different challenges, and they can use these opportunities to creatively figure out solutions to problems, reach out for help when needed, and realize they have the innate capacity to overcome setbacks. They are continually developing their ethical and global citizenship as they have time to think about their responsibilities in this pandemic. In order to support our students, we are providing wellness and resiliency-building activities and materials for students, staff, and parents. Our students will also be looking to you, their parents and guardians, as models of resiliency and self-care.

What does this all mean?

Distance learning necessitates the use of new and different technology tools while adjusting to a new “classroom” format at home. As parents, you are trying to keep up with this new schedule and these tools, and it can feel unsettling to not be able to help your student like you did in the past. We understand this which is why we wanted to share with you the expectations moving forward for this school year as they relate to your child’s learning. Please feel free to reach out if you have any questions or concerns as we finish up the school year.