Q&A: DR. MELISSA CARR OF DELAND HIGH SCHOOL

DeLand High overcame many challenges this year

Editor’s note: At the end of what must be one of the most unusual years ever at Deland High School, Principal Dr. Melissa Carr answers some questions about online learning and the class of 2020.

Q. First, please give us a few details. What was the Deland High School population this school year? How many teachers? How many (approximately) seniors are graduating?

A. Deland High enrolled 2,780 students with 180 total staff members that included teachers, paraprofessionals and support staff. The class of 2020 has 627 seniors.

Q. It seemed almost overnight that Volusia County Schools were converted from in-person, in-classroom to 100-percent virtual. How did you navigate that change for DeLand High? How are you going to get it back?

A. Shortly after our return from the winter break, I was paying attention to national news regarding the possible implication that COVID would have on public education.

From past experience in the world of online learning, I was putting procedures and tools in place to assist our students and staff in any form of transition that awaited all of us. For example, our teachers already had an online collaboration tool for archiving meeting notes, discussing lesson plans, and managing one another.

Moving these meetings from face-to-face to virtual was seamless for our staff. We began immediately with prescheduled guided help tutorials for any staff member who needed it. The district curriculum staff worked around the clock to provide schools with online courses ready to go for teachers to take over the reins and begin leading students from home.

A majority of our students adapted well to the online learning environment. They learned quickly and sometimes daily, communication from their teachers.

All students were provided with a free laptop loaner as long as they had access to internet at home. For families without internet access, we worked for days preparing printed coursework for students to pick up.

We utilized phones, phone calls, website, and social media to communicate to our students all of the resources available.

The district published a very thorough Instructional Continuity Plan (ICP) and set up a hotline and email for families.

Our School Way Call team distributed more than 200 free meals every day during the time of remote instruction, and our counselors contacted every single family to ensure that students were safe, fed, healthy, and keeping up with their schoolwork.

The entire school district came together to take care of one another and our community.

Q. What are the biggest challenges of virtual schooling?

A. No. 1 challenge is physical proximity between teacher and student. Our teachers have expressed very normal frustrations of not being able to reach some students or not having the ability to immediately demonstrate something in real time.

For teachers, the challenge is the same. They very much missed the face-to-face time with their students or not having the ability to set up regular check-in meetings to dive deeper into each student’s needs.

For students, the challenge is the same. They very much missed the face-to-face time with teachers so they can receive immediate feedback on a question or receive help on challenging concepts. Now, teachers and students have to schedule a call each week to dive deeper into each student’s needs.

Please see CARR, 3

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