A VIRTUAL SUCCESS
The days started quite typically for Patrick Whelan. Just as he always has in his three decades at Saint Stephen’s, the veteran history teacher rose early, fueled up with breakfast, and donned his dress shirt and tie to prepare for work. But that’s where the familiarity ended.

Instead of making the short trek from his nearby home to the SSES campus, Whelan settled in to conduct class from his makeshift home office – a laptop perched on the family’s dining room table. It was a scene repeated all over the area as Saint Stephen’s faculty members transitioned to virtual instruction in mid-March in response to the COVID-19 quarantine.

“It was more for my own mindset, so that I knew it was time for me to be on and sharp for the day,” Whelan said of continuing his routine of wearing formal attire. “It was a ritual for my own sake.”

Following nearly a week of behind-the-scenes preparation while still on campus, SSES immediately began distance learning on March 18. Remote classes started in virtual classrooms, using a wide variety of online tools – Zoom videoconferencing, Flipgrid, YouTube, Google and Microsoft products, as well as the SSES Online CRM platform. The transition was highly successful and nearly seamless as teachers demonstrated their ability to deliver exceptional education under exceptional circumstances.

Campus traditions such as weekly chapel services and assemblies went virtual in an attempt to bring consistency and normalcy to each week. And while a series of important annual celebrations to honor the graduating Class of 2020 – senior luncheon, Forever Falcon gathering, etc. – could not be held face-to-face, they were adjusted to make sure seniors had these experiences.

Although the faculty agreed that the process was better termed “emergency remote teaching” than true distance learning, the entire program allowed Saint Stephen’s to continue to provide its rigorous, college-preparatory academic program while being sensitive to the challenges and stressors everyone in the school community faced as a result of the pandemic.

“All of us were trying out this grand experiment and wondering if it would work,” Whelan said. “We adjusted and got better and better at it over time. Initially, I think we relied a great deal on videoconferencing. As time went on, I know I stepped back and allowed the students to do more of their own research, write more expansive, thoughtful pieces, and reflect. I probably would not have done that if I was in the classroom.”

The challenges presented by the virtual environment were also experienced differently at each grade level. For teachers of the school’s youngest students, there was an adjustment.

“We do so much hands-on. It was going to be very important for us to make a proper transition,” kindergarten teacher Jennifer Berquist said. “In our planning time, we mapped out five weeks. The parents were so supportive and understanding. It wasn’t ideal, but we made it work and it tasked me as an educator to think outside the box.”

In many regards, independent schools led the way during Florida’s transition to virtual instruction. The majority of the state’s public school districts closed the doors to their schools on March 16 and didn’t begin any kind of online classes until two weeks later. When they did, on March 30, the platform used by many schools throughout the state – including Manatee County – went offline during the very first day of classes.

Only a third of the 100 school districts tracked by the Center on Reinventing Public Education in the wake of the coronavirus took attendance, and several areas of Florida struggled. According to a report in the South Florida Sun Sentinel, online attendance in Palm Beach County started promisingly, at 86.4-percent in March, but dipped to just 75.3-percent in April. Orange County schools counted nearly 3,000 students who had done no work since distance learning began there in mid-March, and attendance was at about 78-percent on April 10, district administrators told the Orlando Sentinel. A year earlier, on Friday, April 12, 2019, more than 93-percent of the county’s students were in attendance.

Palm Beach County also cancelled most final exams and did away with community service requirements for graduating seniors. Duval County extended its school year from May 29 to June 3 in order to complete academic requirements.

“I think teaching is a great deal about personal connection and that’s difficult to achieve in the virtual world. But we had preparation and ideas about expectations,” Whelan said. “We used the technology that we had to do both synchronous and asynchronous instruction. I think we did a very good job of it. The history instruction we did was aligned to what we’d do normally, asynchronus instruction. I think we did a very good job of it. The history instruction we did was aligned to what we’d do normally, and we learned to use a whole new bag of tools for teaching that will come in handy once we return to the classroom.”

Saint Stephen’s also played an active role in the community during the quarantine. The science department donated more than 5,000 latex gloves to Manatee Memorial Hospital, and protective goggles to a local pediatric practice. Senior Michael Mills turned a passion for technology he stoked as a tech intern at SSES into a way to make a difference during the pandemic. After finding a tutorial and online model, Mills began printing protective face shields on his home 3D printer with the intention of donating them to local healthcare facilities. When word of Michael’s work spread through a post on the school’s Facebook page, he was inundated with requests for the shields from an SSES alum and anesthesiologist in Alabama, the mother of a nurse in Tennessee, a Bradenton physician’s office, the local hospice, and others. His efforts attracted significant media attention. Another student, junior Collin McKinley, received recognition for working with an area medical group to help them launch an online care platform that was simple to use for both staff and patients.

“I am so impressed by the manner in which all of our FCIS schools embraced and implemented distance learning, providing continuity in the educational experiences of their students. I’m on several boards, and as I engage with other independent school associations around the country, I’m proud to share how seamlessly our schools embraced this new normal,” said Dr. Barbara Hodges, Executive Director of the Florida Council of Independent Schools. “I believe our school communities are working harder than ever, demonstrating their commitments to their students and families.”

“I think the biggest thing I learned is that we’re all resilient. We do what needs to be done for the best of the students and families,” Berquist added. “Did I sign up for this? No, but we do this because it’s important.”