

LISD Navigates the Uncharted Waters of a Global Pandemic

Students and staff respond to unforeseen circumstances.

By April Cunningham



LHS seniors attended a virtual rose cutting ceremony.

When Lewisville ISD students and staff returned from winter break in early January 2020, no one expected nor predicted what was to come only two short months later. News outlets had begun covering stories about the novel coronavirus impacting other nations, but questions remained on how, when and if the disease would affect the United States. Soon, cases began popping up on the East and West Coasts, and toward the end of February, with spring break already on the horizon, discussions about the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) and its potential impact on schools were taking place across Texas.

By the time LISD let out for its spring break March 13, the district had released three updates with health guidance and implemented additional safety measures, but had not yet made a decision regarding school closure. Behind the scenes, due to the quickly-evolving situation, district personnel were working around the clock to ensure LISD would be ready for any decision. Four days later, LISD announced school buildings and facilities would be closed through April 3. And, just a little more than a week after that, in conjunction with other Denton County districts, a decision was made March 26 to

close through April 17. By March 31, Texas Governor Greg Abbott ordered all schools closed until May 4. Eventually, the State halted in-person instruction for the remainder of the school year.

Closing school facilities for something other than weather, is out of the norm for LISD and most school districts. Statewide closures? Unheard of. When LISD made the decision to extend the initial closure, Superintendent of Schools Dr. Kevin Rogers released a video message to students, staff, parents and the community.

"I know there's a lot of anxiety, uncertainty

and concern in our families and community,” he said. “Not only about the health and well-being of your family, but also how this at-home instruction is actually going to work.”

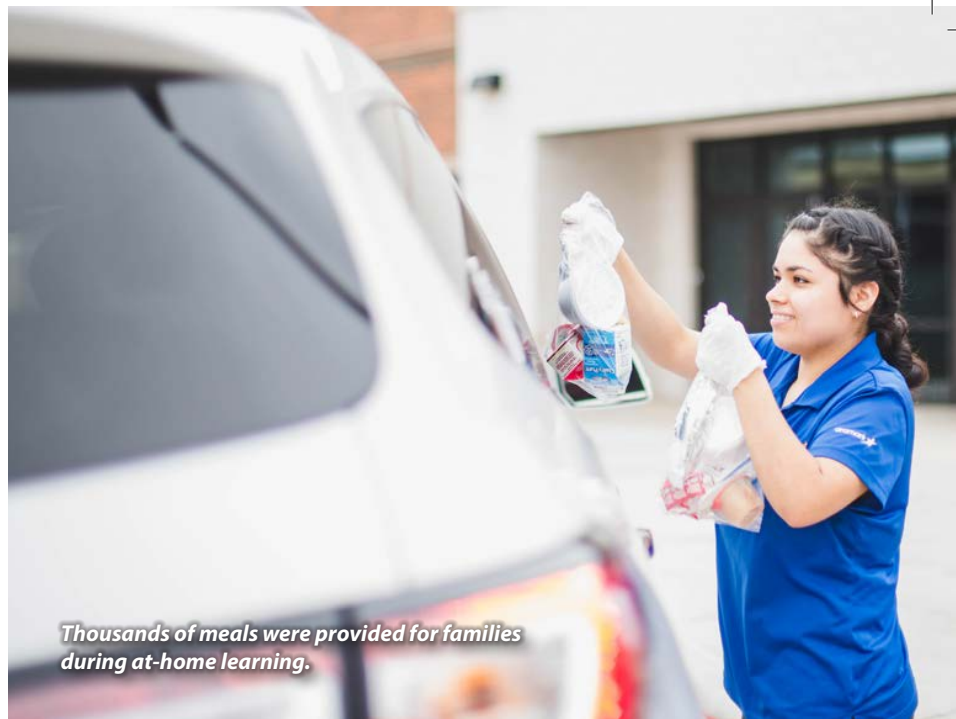
He continued, “In my 34 years in LISD, we have always been close partners with our families and this is now more true than ever. Please know we are in this together and our first priority remains serving our students, families, staff, and supporting our communities.”

“In this together” quickly became LISD’s motto.

From the start, the district was committed to providing the resources and support necessary for students and their families. In the first week of service for free meals, March 23-27, LISD Child Nutrition provided more than 175,000 meals and added new locations nearly every week. The district’s Technology department worked diligently to incorporate the necessary technology and support for remote learning, added external-facing Wi-Fi to numerous campus buildings and distributed thousands of devices to students and staff.

In addition, LISD Guidance and Counseling continued to provide virtual services and programming for students and families. All students and staff received a Smore newsletter each week outlining healthy coping skills, articles and videos on positive mental health, as well as links to resources. In addition, social workers facilitated supporting meal sites, connecting families to community resources and served as the contact for up-to-date changes regarding resources and support.

“Counselors and social workers are



Thousands of meals were provided for families during at-home learning.

naturally flexible individuals who are able to think on their feet and change direction quickly due to the unpredictability, daily, of what students and families may need,” Director of Counseling Services Monya Crow said. “This skill set provided the tools to very quickly build a virtual counseling and social work program that met students, staff and families where they were when the pandemic started. I have full confidence that this was an enormous positive resource and experience for anyone who needed it.”

One of the district’s biggest initiatives was implementing and transitioning to At-Home Learning, the virtual instruction plan. LISD launched At-Home Learning shortly after spring break, making adjustments along the way, while students and staff alike adjusted to

the new normal.

“I think at-home learning was a challenge for all of us,” said Silas DuFrene, Ethridge Elementary fifth-grade teacher, about navigating the transition. “It’s not what we would choose as a way of teaching our students. Overall, I think we’ve done as well as could be expected since we essentially had to launch into it so quickly.”

Teachers like DuFrene were grateful for the different technological opportunities available, especially WebEx, which the district implemented as its virtual conferencing tool. WebEx allowed teachers to connect with students, even while apart.

“I remember the first time that we met as a class online and we could all see each other,” he said. “Everyone was so happy and excited to be in that one space again, even though it was a virtual space. It meant a lot to be able to re-establish that connection. It’s such an important part of what we do as educators and every teacher knows that.”

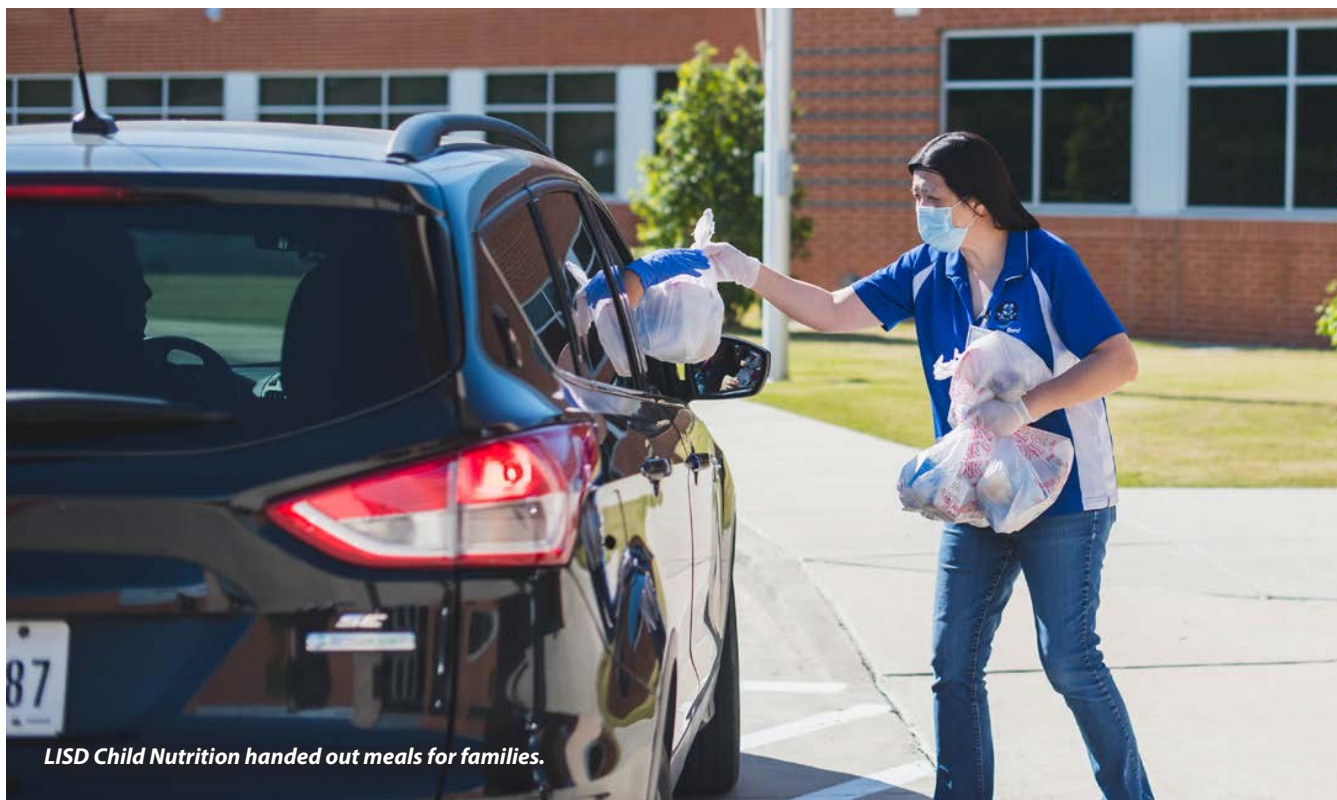
Olivia Nicholson, a Mill Street Elementary fourth-grade teacher, understood and related to DuFrene.

“Like all other teachers felt, I missed the feel of being in the classroom with my students and hearing my colleagues and friends teach throughout the hallways,” Nicholson said. “There’s nothing quite like it. With that being



LISD Technology department deployed devices to families for at-home learning.

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LISD Child Nutrition handed out meals for families.

said, we tried to recreate that feeling the best we could.”

Nicholson said she adapted many of her activities to be tech-friendly, such as in-home scavenger hunts and video “brain-ercise,” and even created video recordings of frequently asked questions for students to watch if she was unavailable.

“We learned how to share a digital classroom in an equitable and respectful manner,” she said. “With my colleagues and teammates, we relied heavily on video conferencing tools, phone calls, texts, and humor to get to where we are today. Everyone was so willing and ready to help at a moment’s notice, and our school community is better because of it.”

Adapting to At-Home Learning took some time for students too. Flower Mound 9th Grade Campus student Ella Ricks missed her friends and the social interaction school provided, but discovered ways to grow from the experience.

“I learned how to manage my time successfully and prioritize my goals,” Ricks said. “During online school, it was extremely easy to fall behind on schoolwork and get distracted. I gave myself structure in my day, which is a skill I can take with me to college and my adult life.”

Beyond the instructional adjustments, students said they learned more than schoolwork while at home.

“Something I learned is to appreciate every moment,” Jacob Vaughan, Marcus 9th Grade Campus student, said. “I should have appreciated the moments I had with my teammates and friends before we had to split for this short period of time. Every moment we have with everyone is special, and we need to cherish each one. One day something might happen and you’ll regret that you missed the opportunities.”

Perhaps the group most affected by the closures was high school seniors — the Class of 2020. In a letter to senior students, Superintendent Rogers promised there would be graduation ceremonies in some form or another. And while school and district officials tried their best to ensure seniors experienced the other milestones and moments that come with the final year of school, such as prom and award ceremonies, many events had to be altered or canceled. Despite the circumstances, the LISD Class of 2020 still held their heads high.

“Our situation was completely unprecedented and impacted every aspect of our lives,” Hebron High School senior Fernanda Galvez Orozco said. “Yet, the

magnitude of this experience forced our class, school, and district to grow in character and to become appreciative of our surroundings, even of things we held for granted before.”

She added, “We have learned to appreciate the ability to attend school, to be around friends and family, and most importantly to be healthy. We are so fortunate to be living in such an incredible district that puts our well-being and safety before everything and that has the resources to keep classrooms operating. I just hope we continue to grow as a community and appreciate everything we have.”

Seniors may not have received their prom due to stay-at-home recommendations and social distancing guidelines, but enjoyed events like drive-thru parades to see their teachers and celebrate their achievements. Lewisville High School even found a way to create a virtual version of their Rosecutting Ceremony, an 85-year-old tradition.

“I hope that everyone looks at how the Class of 2020 was able to come even closer together, supporting one another through a difficult time,” Lewisville High School senior Sylvia Nalbandian said. “When people look back at this year, I want them to remember that they can overcome any challenge that comes their way. This year certainly didn’t end the way we envisioned, but we adapted to

changes and tried to end our senior year on a positive note.”

Keeping his promise to seniors, Superintendent Rogers and the district, with the help of local officials, did find a way to hold graduation ceremonies and managed to do so on the originally scheduled dates of May 23 and May 24, albeit a new venue. More than 4,200 seniors crossed the finish line—literally—at Texas Motor Speedway, permanently joining the long line of LISD graduates before them but in unforgettable fashion.

Commencement aside, LISD’s 2019-20 school year officially concluded May 21. Although the suspension of in-person classes and the move to At-Home Learning was a learning curve for everyone, students and staff persevered.

“My students did what they have always done,” Nicholson said, “risen to the challenge.”

In the face of unprecedented times, LISD students, staff, families and community rallied around one another and remained unified. While some uncertainty looms over what is to come, one thing is certain, Lewisville ISD is “in this together.”



TCHS seniors paraded through the campus parking lot to gather their yard signs.



Technology and Facilities employees worked with campuses to provide internet services to students across the district.