March 15, 2020

Dear Parents and Students,

As I am sure you are aware, Governor Northam announced Friday that all K-12 schools in Virginia will suspend onsite classes for at least two weeks. This mandate applies to both public and private schools, so Norfolk Academy will move to a distance learning model through March 27\textsuperscript{th} at the earliest.

As our faculty approaches a professional work day this Monday, I want to impress upon you that Norfolk Academy (in a figurative or virtual sense, of course) remains open, with instruction and student learning uninterrupted and continuous. With that notion in mind, this coming week, we will support each other — our faculty, students, and parents — in advancing your child’s education. To help this collective effort, I want to provide you more details about our transition from onsite to distance learning and ask you to anticipate additional communication from your child’s Division Director, teachers, and me in the coming days.

We will rely this week on educational and digital assets already in place — assignment bulletins, homework packets or materials, conventional email, Canvas Learning Management System (in middle and upper school) while we transition the community to our Distance Learning Plan. After our professional work Monday and some tweaks or refinements, we will be sharing more details and information with you, but I do want to give you sufficient information now to help you and your child anticipate this new mode of instruction.

Our plan really has the two primary thrusts referenced above: 1) To continue instruction and your child’s learning this week (and going forward) with resources and digital assets we are accustomed to using — e.g., Canvas, email, webpages, etc., and 2) To complement this continuous instruction with synchronous and asynchronous distance learning — including using Zoom videoconferencing technology to create real-time video and audio connection between our teachers and students.

To support you as a parent and to assist your child in maintaining (maybe in some cases renewing) structure and routine, you should anticipate that your child will observe or honor a daily academic schedule from 9:00 a.m. - 12:00 noon each day, with the understanding that students will likely need additional time in the afternoons or evenings to complete homework. Our goal for Middle and Upper School students is to launch this schedule on Wednesday, March 18, and for Lower School students on Monday, March 23. There will be an initial expectation for teachers and students to be available to each other during this time (and at other times, too, as instructional questions or issues arise and individual schedules allow) online, via email, phone, or scheduled Zoom videoconference sessions. Additionally, a common goal in our Distance Learning Plan is for all classroom teachers to
have a real-time, Zoom videoconference engagement with their homeroom or each middle or upper school class twice a week.

More than ever we need to partner with you — and work together to the same end — to keep your child’s academic, intellectual, emotional, and psychological growth moving forward. The last thing we want, we assure you, is to have your child parked in front of a screen for hours each day or grinding through worksheets. Germaine to this point, I’m including a link to a Stanford professor’s essay about at-home activities for children beyond conventional modes of learning.

To reinforce the theme of varying your own child’s routines, we liken real-time Zoom videoconferencing with your child’s homeroom or class to what we formerly knew as a “handshake,” a quick but substantive personal bonding between teacher and students. These videoconference sessions, even if only 5-10 minutes in length (or somewhat longer, perhaps 20-25 minutes, depending on the homeroom, class, or age of students), we will use to amplify and enhance instruction. This real-time video and audio experience will also be of great reassurance to our students and faculty, as well as an opportunity to preserve what we’ve invested so much in forming these past months, the deep, substantive relationships between student and teacher that are our institutional currency and DNA.

I will spare you philosophizing on this theme, but we are a place of extraordinarily powerful and deep relationships — it’s never been our way to outsource to technology, iPads, or one-to-one devices what can never be replicated digitally — our connection to one another, our lifeblood at Norfolk Academy. As I shared with the faculty, I’m excited by the possibilities for our faculty to collaborate on, experiment with, and imagine new ways to teach (and learn!) and avenues to deepen the quality of our own relationships and professional colleagueship. These are the kinds of serendipitous opportunities we need to seize upon and use as adults to model for children — the joy we experience in intellectual excitement and discovery.

Though I’ve attempted to present you some information and goals we have for our transition to distance learning, I realize that the way will be rife with questions, challenges, frustrations, and achievements — for faculty, students, and parents. I land and close firmly on “achievements” because of great faith in our faculty, in you as educational partners, and, most important, in your children, from knowing and loving them, a sentiment my colleagues hold alongside me. I will ask you to model the behavior and attitude I’ve asked our faculty to adopt — positive, resolute, and supportive.

When I addressed our middle and upper school students in the Refectory Thursday in anticipation of our rather abrupt and unexpected closing, I expressed to them the deep sense of loss — I used the term grieving — the faculty and I were feeling about the possibility of missing them for an even
longer period of time and shared that they, too, would develop this same feeling. (In fact, one of our seniors shared later with a faculty member that, "I don’t think I’ve ever been so sad about a four-day weekend.") There will be a positive turn, I reminded our students, too, I am certain of it, and we will, Bulldog Strong, enjoy it together when it comes. As always, please stay in touch with us, with your child’s Division Director or teacher, and me, and thank you in advance for your support and confidence.

Yours sincerely,

Dennis G. Manning
Headmaster