

Parish and School Strategies during Covid

For many years, the parishes and the school divisions of the Archdiocese of Edmonton have worked hard to build strong and effective relationships between their respective institutions. In 2016, *The Standards for Preparing Children and Youth for the Sacraments* were promulgated, making the meetings between the Family of Schools and parishes even more dynamic.

For the most part, this process has served us well. But in March of this year, everything changed when our province began to experience the devastating effects of the worldwide pandemic, resulting in parish and school closures. Soon, most parishes and schools refrained from meeting, many parish staff were laid-off, and communicating with the local parish became very challenging.

Come September, large school celebrations in either the local parish or in the school gymnasium will remain a challenge. Social distancing rules will still apply.

So how do our parishes and schools navigate these uncharted waters? And how can our parishes and schools maintain the strong connections they have worked so hard to develop? Below are some strategies that both our parishes and schools can use in the coming months to maintain and perhaps creatively enhance their parish-school-home relationships.

For the Priest and/or Parish Staff:

So much of who we are in Catholic education is based on our existence as a faith-based community, where we gather to see, hear, and be with each other in prayer. Participation in the Sacraments, feast-day celebrations, prayer, and rituals form the basis of our daily interactions and activities.

- While large school celebrations will be prohibited, consider participating in classroom visits or classroom liturgies. Small classes of children and young people will still be able to celebrate their faith together.
- At the same time, when Archdiocesan and divisional guidelines allow, contemplate hosting an outdoor liturgy at the school where more students will be able to attend and the risk of transmitting the virus will be less.

- These are stressful times, and parishes and schools need to work together to foster supportive relationships for the students and staff. Children and youth may not understand the context of recent events and communications they have heard or seen through various media, and staff may also be struggling or feeling overwhelmed. Visit the individual classrooms and staff rooms, sharing a message of faith and hope.
- Consider sending a personal video to the students, staff and families, or recording a reading of the day's gospel, or even of yourself working in the parish office. These may seem like trivial gestures but speaking from the heart and saying and doing human things to lighten the stress and anxiety of students and staff is helpful.
- Pre-record a message or little liturgy that can be shared over the Smart Board or screen in the individual classrooms. This could be highly effective, especially for special feast days or liturgical seasons when larger school celebrations would have been the norm.
- Livestream yourself into a class using one of the many available high-tech options and platforms such as Zoom or Teams. Participate in a Religion lesson, read a story to the students, or even lead a liturgical celebration.
- Consider filming a tour of the church that schools can use as part of their Religion lessons.
- If you are uncomfortable filming yourself, visit the school and share a message of hope or pray with the students over the intercom, either at the beginning or at the end of the school day.
- Publish a one-page newsletter or bulletin highlighting the events in the parish that would be shared with the school, and in turn with students and their families via email.
- As part of the newsletter or bulletin, include the link to the parish website and livestream Mass, if available, and provide suggestions for family prayer. Helping families with rituals and prayer, especially during these challenging times, can have a lasting effect on children's faith development for years to come.
- Schedule a meeting with the School Principal and/or School Chaplain, either in person or virtually, to discuss other ways of sustaining the parish-school-home relationship.
- Lastly and most important, pray for the school community as part of the special intentions during Mass.

For the School Principal:

- Encourage staff to maintain the parish-school-home relationship by working closely and collaboratively with the local priest and parish staff.
- These are stressful times, and parishes and schools need to work together to foster supportive relationships for all stakeholders. The priest and parish staff may also be struggling or feeling overwhelmed. Consider sending a personal video to the parish from the students and staff of the school, sharing messages of love and support.
- Invite and schedule the local priest and parish staff to visit individual classrooms and/or to attend a staff meeting.
- As the Sacraments of Eucharist and Confirmation will likely not be celebrated in large groups at the parish, offer words of congratulations over the intercom or broadcast every week to the students who have received their sacraments.
- Some priests may be uncomfortable or may not have the capacity to film themselves praying, leading classroom celebrations, or participating in Religion lessons. With the help of the school's resources, provide the priest with the high-tech options, platforms, and support they will need to record themselves or to livestream into the classrooms and/or staff room.
- Publish a one-page newsletter or bulletin highlighting the events in the school that would be shared with the parish, and in turn with the parishioners, either during the Masses or via email.
- Lastly and most important, pray for the parish community during the morning announcements and classroom liturgies.



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