




CASE STUDY

GETTING READY FOR 2020-2021:
PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT PAYS OFF FOR
EAGLE'S LANDING CHRISTIAN ACADEMY





Eagle's Landing Christian Academy in McDonough, GA, remains committed to offering students a quality education in a Christian environment through the COVID-19 pandemic. Their goal is to cover all the standards and fully prepare students to move on to the next grade level via a virtual learning environment. They also firmly believe in continuing their mission to empower students to impact the world despite what's happening around them. The school offers grades K-12 and has 953 students enrolled.

Tracy Crawford, FACTS' K-12 customer relationship manager spoke to Eagle's Landing Christian Academy's Chuck Gilliam, head of school, Kim Smith, director of marketing & communications, and Martha Fairley, director of instructional technology.

► **Tracy:** How soon did you start preparing to move to distance learning?

- **Chuck:** We put our pandemic committee into place right away. We were like everyone else saying things like, "Is this really happening? Surely this is just going to be a week or a couple days." We were following the news, but I can promise you we were not fully prepared for this as it unfolded.

Providentially, we had a professional development day already planned for a Friday. So the Wednesday and Thursday beforehand, we started getting together and said, "Alright, we have a major issue here. We may have to shut down." We went to Martha to help prepare. Martha has been beating the drum for over the past five years by really pushing us to be a SMART Showcase school by integrating technology and positioning us to be ready for something like this through Google Classroom, particularly in middle school and high school. Lower school was a tougher transition for us.

We asked Martha to have something prepared for Friday for us to train on with our staff. We were thinking it would be one week, or maybe two maximum. Martha did a wonderful presentation to take us through what the first iteration would look like. We initially started with trying to get our teachers and families online. By week two, we came out with our full plan of implementation. That's when we decided to transition to three half days in high school and allow Tuesday and Thursday to be instructional focus days. Those days would be dedicated to tutoring sessions for individual instruction for our students. We started seeing schools that were going to a full day Monday through Thursday-type plan. We did not feel like that was sustainable in a virtual environment initially.

One of the things that we really struggled with through this transition was that our school is a BYOT (Bring Your Own Technology) school. We are not a 1:1 technology school. It was pretty evident right away that we were going to have some trouble with a seamless introduction of a virtual platform.

- **Martha:** As Chuck said, when we initially went into this we thought it would only be a few days. Then it turned into a couple weeks. Here we are, eight weeks later.

Our school does what we call Charger Thursdays. That's our professional development program geared toward teachers. We hold it every Thursday on a different topic. It could be curriculum type of instruction. It could be technology professional development for teachers or a myriad of things we train on during the school year. Whomever is teaching Charger Thursday is instructing all day. Teachers come in and out depending on when their planning period is that day. It definitely respects their time and it was a matter of tearing the schedule apart to make it fit. Our Dean of Academics made that a personal crusade to make sure it happened because we needed it if we were going to continue to grow.

So our teachers had been trained on Google Classroom, but we had never mandated it. We trained from the standpoint of, "This would be great to use in your classroom to give you a flow in terms of work management and assessment. This is a great learning management system." We had several teachers that jumped on board,

but by no means was it 100% utilization. But, the training had taken place. When COVID-19 happened, it was something the middle school and high school teachers knew of and could get back to quickly. It was definitely a plus being able to keep up with things in an online environment.

We did something very different for our elementary teachers because our elementary teachers weren't quite ready for Google Classroom. There was no way we're going to introduce a new platform and have time to train them because we were moving so quickly. We wanted to go with something our teachers were already using. Between utilizing FACTS SIS and emails to parents, that seemed to be a better fit for our elementary students, families, and teachers. Some teachers started with paper assignments in folders until we couldn't have families come on campus anymore. Teachers then posted assignments on FACTS Family Portal and received assignments back via email [scanned copies or photos].

Our registrar and I had already set up the API integration between Google Classroom and FACTS SIS. We had piloted it in the background with a couple of teachers to see how it worked. I promise you it was no more than just a couple of weeks after that we said, "Hey, this works and works great!" If we have to do distance learning again in the fall, all grade levels are going to use Google Classroom. We are training elementary teachers over the summer. We got feedback from parents that it was easier to keep up with Google Classroom. They got progress reports and it was a seamless way to conduct their classes. That is definitely a lesson learned.

► **Tracy:** Can you discuss the Distance Learning 2020 digital document created by Cindy George, your dean of academics?

► **Chuck:** Once we saw that we were in this for the long haul, we pulled together our academic team. We had also started to receive feedback from families after we sent out some surveys. We received feedback to questions like, "How's it going? What are some of the issues you are running into?" We were processing some of the things Martha talked about with Zoom and Google Classroom. Also, we wanted to come back and tell them what our plan would be moving forward. Bottom line, we were trying to make sure we were answering those parents who were asking for refunds or discounts. How do we create an academic platform where they will feel the weight of the rigor moving forward?

We developed a common theme. Our promise to our parents was that we would cover the standards with biblical worldview integration and we would prepare their student to move on to next grade level. Our mantra was: This is our guarantee. It's going to look different. The seat time will be a little different. We are not going to be with your child all day long, but our promise to you has not changed.



We wanted Cindy, our academic dean, to prepare a [Distance Learning 2020 document](#) and write a case for why our virtual platform would work and what our plan would be to move things forward. She included [CESA \(Council on Educational Standards & Accountability\) data](#) to articulate our case. We also ramped up each area of the school and our expectations for middle school, high school, and our Tuesday/Thursday opportunities. [Mount Paran Christian School](#) was the school we looked at the closest to see what they were doing.

Lower school and preschool were the areas where we felt most disjointed. It was difficult to manage the lack of face-to-face interactions. But parents really wanted face-to-face, so we wanted to make sure they knew there was an expectation for our preschool. In K-12, we only had one withdrawal, but in preschool we had about 15. We had to really switch things up. Our teachers stepped in and began to have Zoom meetings twice a week. They started to do a lot of pre-recorded stuff. They also created stuff with Facebook like personal pages where they could utilize their own videos or other teacher's videos. All those things pulled together helped ease the tide of preschool withdrawals we were seeing. We did decide to discount preschool tuition. That is the only area of the school where the board chose to discount. In K-12, there was no discounting other than we refunded lunch through SAGE because our lunch is included in tuition.

► **Tracy:** What are all the tools you are using for your distance learning approach?

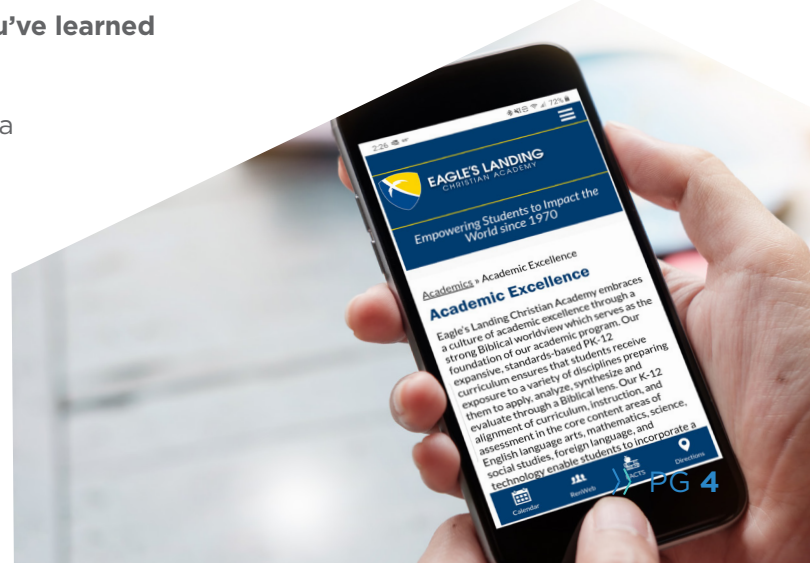
► **Martha:** We are a G-Suite school. We use all the Google applications. The choice was Google Meet or Zoom. In the beginning, Zoom was not necessarily geared toward K-12. At the time Zoom had bells and whistles that we felt we could benefit from, although it was not geared toward K-12. We felt Google Meet was a more protective environment, but it lacked a lot of the functionality we needed. We gave teachers a choice. They could use whichever one they felt comfortable with at the time. In the meantime, we kept pushing Zoom and Google to get with the program. We were in daily conversations with their support team to get more out of the platforms and put more security on Zoom.

► **Tracy:** How responsive were they when you reached out?

► **Martha:** We have given them several shout outs on social media because they were very responsive. Zoom added so many layers of protection for K-12. They added waiting rooms. They added passwords, so by default you had to have a password to join. They responded very quickly. When COVID-19 escalated, they relaxed a lot of mandatory requirements. For example, they used to only allow so many participants in a meeting for so much time on the free version, but they have now relaxed those rules. We received similar feedback with Google and their support team. They started rolling out more security on their platform. When we first started using Google Meets, students had the ability to kick each other out of the meeting. Google was great at taking care of that problem.

► **Tracy:** What are some of the most important things you've learned during this transition?

► **Martha:** From a technology standpoint, because we are a BYOT school and not 1:1, we have a few students who do not own devices. We previously loaned out devices to those students during the school day from a laptop cart. Now, not only did we have high school students at home that did not have a device, but they were competing for the one device in the household if they had siblings. We ended up loaning out many devices to students and faculty.



In our elementary school, we would loan iPads for students that didn't have them, but also for those who had multiple siblings in one household competing for the same device and who maybe had parents working at home. We required parents sign for them.

- **Kim:** One of the most important things I learned is to keep your feet on a swivel. Parents want to know what is going on, even if it's as simple as, "We are working on it."
 - **Martha:** That's a good point. Even if it is being able to turn and say, "You know what, that worked horribly so we're going to try something different." We tried a lot of different tools. Assessment was one area we had the most back and forth on. Some of the tools we tried did not work the way we had anticipated. So we got to a point where we said it's okay to try different things and we understood that maybe what works for one classroom doesn't work for another and we gave the teachers some flexibility in their choices as well.
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► **Tracy:** What are your top three tips for schools for doing distance learning successfully?

- **Chuck:** Standardizing your platform is critical. We still need to enhance the instructional seat time. We are teaching this generation, but we are asking another generation to pay for it. The older generation needs to feel the time. We feel like the three half days worked for this season, but if we bring this back on in the fall, it will probably be a four full day model with a flex day of some sort for catch up and make up work. In the end, it achieves the same thing. It allows the teacher to shut down their class at any time. They don't have to teach for the full 50 minute block. We consistently heard from parents that they felt the instructional time was not frequent enough. My major take away is that we need consistency in terms of platform and we need to standardize the learning management platform.

I think the jury is still out on how to do assessment properly. I know there are tools for that, but they are either expensive or we don't have them. We are concerned about the amount of cheating that could go on in this environment if there aren't better products offered.

► **Tracy:** What were your main methods of communicating with current families and who was responsible for managing it?

- **Kim:** I was responsible for communications and Chuck approved everything that was sent. I will generally include our staff & faculty on any communication I put out just so they are aware of what is being sent and they can answer questions if they arise.

I've done a lot of work with FACTS SIS' email communications area and it is fantastic. As far as our current parents, we use FACTS SIS communications constantly. We use Constant Contact for newsletters to jazz it up a little bit, but the SIS communications makes it so easy to make sure we are not missing anyone because it uses their correspondence email address on file. It helps keep us in contact with parents. They can't unsubscribe and miss out on a crucial communication.

In the beginning, we had a conversation about whether communication was spinning out of control. We did try to rein it in to make it more concise. We looked at whether we could accomplish the same amount with two communications versus four, for example.

- **Chuck:** We have updated videos on our website. The videos on the website were a collaborative conversation with our academic team on what message we wanted to send to our families. I would take the script from those meetings, incorporate what we were hearing from the community, and then record it and share it.

We also assigned every family in our school to our support staff. They made several calls just to check in with them to make sure they were okay. Those calls ended up being very productive.

- **Kim:** We asked the support staff to try to make three points of contact. One was to be in contact with the family on the phone. If they missed them, it might have been a voice mail, but they would continue until they reached them by phone. We got a really great response from that outreach.
 - **Chuck:** We are also meeting with a consultant on our admissions and communications. That has been helpful to us to have input on how to create that virtual hub and how to streamline some of our conversations. We felt like we were getting the current enrollment piece under control, but our admissions funnel was drying up and we were concerned about no one wanting to be on campus. We are a unique Christian school in that we have a very diverse population of students. The minority population has been hit harder by this crisis. So they are more hesitant to come onto our campus. We are having to be very thoughtful about that as we are putting our plans together.
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► **Tracy:** You mentioned your [Parent Survey](#). Can you share more about the results?

- **Chuck:** It was an ongoing survey that was open to families through most of this process. In the initial response we had about 150 to 200 respondents. It continued to grow from there. Administrators had access to see particular concerns in their area because it allowed parents to write in which school they were involved in and what their concerns were.
 - **Kim:** There were not a lot of surprises. We knew where we were struggling and the survey confirmed that. It did create a catalyst for change for things we did differently in our second week and beyond. We had a lot of praise that came out of the survey. People felt like our teachers were knocking it out of the park and doing a great job. You will always have those that are not satisfied. We heard about that, but it was very valuable to know especially with our younger kids where their issues were and what we could do different.
 - **Chuck:** I also used the survey to try and determine how many families were requesting a discount in tuition. I believe where we got punched hardest was in preschool and we had to really adjust fast. My opinion is we had a slow response in preschool, so we lost families as a result. We assumed there were some things we could not do. Once we really pushed and got that accomplished and enhanced the plan, parents were satisfied. And obviously when we reduced tuition, that made concerns go away.
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► **Tracy:** You mentioned that you hosted a prospective parent reception. What were the results and how did you handle social distancing?

- **Kim:** It was fabulous. We had a great turn out. Our staff was invigorated. They were ready to see people again. The crowd was really good. I think we had close to twenty different families that showed up. Our admissions team scheduled multiple tours where the individual families had a personal one-on-one tour of our campus. It was a great success.



For social distancing, we spaced our tables out more than we usually do. The departments liked having more space. We have two large spaces in our inner foyer and outside foyer. We had hand sanitizer everywhere. The people that wanted to wear masks did so.

► **Tracy:** Did you already have your Virtual Tour in place?

► **Kim:** No. We had to quickly get that put together. Our [virtual tour](#) is now available on our admissions page. Right now we are working on a virtual open house that will be on our website so the folks who are skittish about meeting us in person can see more about our school through the virtual open house. Our virtual tour is about three minutes long, so it is short, but only meant to be a first glimpse. If they want something more in depth, they will have the virtual open house available to them.

► **Chuck:** We had to be a little more intentional about connecting with families who had not re-enrolled. We have a re-enrollment specialist that has been making phone calls to all those families. We also started assigning inquiries to our assistants for their areas of the school. They are making personal phone calls to keep in touch with them the best we can. It is good way for us to know what is happening and to help families work through that process.

► **Tracy:** What are your top tips for communicating on social media?

► **Kim:** We have an outside company who does the actual posting and runs it. We filter all of our communication to them. They decide how often to post and sprinkle it out there. They do a fabulous job of making it look good. They know all the algorithms of Facebook and Instagram so they know what the right amount is and that's why we chose to go with that company. We copy them on all our communications. They gather it and decide what and when to post. They do a great job for us.

We market to both current families and use sales ads for growth. The company we use helps us get the biggest bang for our buck in the organic reach. We do a little bit of ad spend, but it is mainly organic.

► **Tracy:** Do you have an example of organic marketing working for you?

► **Kim:** Yes, at the beginning of our parent prospective reception, I started a Facebook live post. The organic reach was over 1000 in two hours. The parents see it, then they share it and it multiplies that way. I had comments from people out of state. It makes you realize who is out there watching and sharing your good news. Another example on social media is when we shared our seniors' photos in front of our building and of course all of our senior parents are sharing that with their families. It goes far and wide.

► **Chuck:** Kim did a great job leveraging all our celebrations. We did a last day celebration for seniors. We put their pictures up on six or seven billboards around the community. We also have a pictorial display on the front of our property. We tried to leverage some of those things too to get new applicant families to see us. There has been a lot of buzz. We visited 43 honor graduates. We went to their homes and gave them signs. That was a big thing on social media. And that even made the newspaper.

► **Kim:** When I came to work, there were people walking among the senior signs. They've been bringing their kids up here and taking pictures by their signs and posting it. It has been one of the best things that we have ever done to get our students recognized on social media.

► **Tracy:** How are you handling tuition payments for 2020-2021? What, if any, changes have you made?

- **Chuck:** Tuition is going up, but it will be our typical increase. We are presenting our families different scenarios for 2020. We are telling them that we are going to be prepared to make changes and pivot as we need to. We released a video to the website ([Looking Forward to 2020](#)) where we presented multiple scenarios to our families that focused on opening face-to-face in the fall.

In scenario one, we are planning, Lord willing, to open with both a traditional format and virtual format synchronously in August. Our parents who are not quite ready to come on campus will be able to take advantage of the virtual plan. There will be no price difference. We will allow them to transition between the two platforms at a particular point. We will need them to tell us in advance if they plan to be in the virtual format and we will schedule out appropriately. We anticipate about 25% of our student body may take advantage of that initially. I think once they see there is a plan in place and things are going okay, they will be ready to transition back to the traditional platform.

On campus we will have precautions. Temperature checks, cleaning, most of the standard stuff you are hearing right now. We will look at some staggered start times. Lunch will be a big issue. We are a SAGE school. They are doing a great job already thinking outside the box. They will help us on that end.

In scenario two, if we have to have limited numbers of students in the classroom, then we would have to transition to more of a hybrid schedule that is three days on, two days off. We will already have the virtual up and running and it will be synchronous. A kid can be Monday/Tuesday/Thursday in the classroom and then Wednesday/Friday at home and the content is moving along. We would rotate students coming on campus. It all sounds really good, but it would be a challenge to pull that off.

In scenario three, we are completely virtual like we are right now. Our implementation would not look the same, though. We would go to a four full-day implementation with one flex day of help classes, tutoring, and connecting individually with teachers. We would tell our parents in advance if we are going virtual and they will get the seat time. Your students will be in class all day long.

We are planning for all of these scenarios in the fall. Our newly released video gives an overview. What we will probably do is create segments of time. If you choose virtual, you will be in virtual the first four and a half weeks and then you can transition back to traditional or vice versa. For example, if someone gets sick, or if we have to quarantine a group.

A more pressing issue for schools in my opinion is not the students. It is going to be the staff. The staff may be the ones that say they are not comfortable coming to work or they get sick, so we might have a lot of staff out. Managing the staff aspect of this is the most concerning to me. I think we can come up with a lot of scenarios to manage students, but if we don't have an AP Biology teacher, we can't adapt quickly to that.

► **Tracy:** How was your financial aid impacted and do you anticipate financial aid changing over the next year?

- **Chuck:** It wasn't as bad as I thought it was going to be. I expected to really get inundated in the spring for the current school year. I think we have processed 15-20 families and have helped somewhere around \$30,000. It has not been significant. It is interesting to see how our community has been hit. I am not sensing our community has been hit quite as hard. We have a lot who are involved in education. We have a lot that work in downtown Atlanta. My big concern right now is the airline industry. We are right by Atlanta Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport. We have a lot of Delta families. It could have a major impact.

- **Kim:** We have a lot of small business owners too, so the faster they can get back to work, the better for them as well.

► **Tracy:** How has FACTS helped you during this time with your tuition or financial aid processes?

► **Chuck:** We rely on FACTS for this process. Obviously, we do all of our billing through FACTS, so we've utilized them quite significantly.

► **Tracy:** What is the next big thing to focus on in preparation for the next school year?

► **Martha:** As Chuck mentioned, we have three scenarios that we are preparing for and each scenario has a different take. From a technology standpoint we are looking at outfitting classrooms with one to two cameras depending on which scenario you choose. We are somewhere around a scenario right now which gives our teachers a way to present content whether they are in classroom or at home, and it gives the students a way to see each other whether in the classroom or at home. But to be honest, we don't know what this is going to look like come August 5, which is our start date.

► **Kim:** I think one of the most important things in my role is to spread the news far and wide that our teachers rock and they knocked it out of the park and that we will be prepared for whatever happens. We are moving forward and we are going to act on the assumption that we will be back to normal. But if not, you will be able to be confident in ELCA that your kids will be ready to move forward and advance, whatever that next step is after this year. We are catalysts for how the world works now, so we will get better at it and we will be able to meet our kids' needs.

► **Martha:** We hammered that point even with the platform we are on right now. We were teaching standards. Nothing changed from what we were teaching. It was how we were presenting it. We still taught standards to make sure our students were ready for the next grade. One of the things I mentioned earlier that really helped us was our professional development program. When Cindy [dean of academics] came on board, one of the pieces that needed work was consistent professional development. There was no time during the day to train and teachers didn't want to stay after school to train. How do you grow in an environment like that? We literally had to turn the schedules upside down to adjust and make it happen. Charger Thursdays were a lifesaver for us. That's how we got training in.

► **Kim:** I would add that the other big thing we're focused on right now is growing our enrollment. We are behind on our applications. We're going to work really hard on that. We usually don't have to focus on it too much over the summer because we meet our numbers fairly easily. We will probably need to have another reception in the summer to keep drawing applications into the funnel. Things are just different now than they've been in the past.

