




CASE STUDY

**MAINTAINING QUALITY LEARNING AND STRONG
RELATIONSHIPS IN A DISTANCE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT:**
THE BROOK HILL SCHOOL'S TRANSITION TO DISTANCE LEARNING





The Brook Hill School prides themselves on preparing students for college, but also for life. Their mission is to provide excellence in college preparatory education, affirm the gifts and challenge the potential of each student, and encourage students to honor God through Christ-like character. The Brook Hill School is an independent, Christian, day and boarding school located in Bullard, TX. They offer grades PreK-12 and have 674 students enrolled.

Tracy Crawford, FACTS' K-12 customer relationship manager spoke to The Brook Hill School's Travis Albea, director of marketing and communications and of boarding admissions.

► **Tracy:** I'm so glad we were able to speak today. First, tell me about your role during the initial transition to distance learning.

► **Travis:** We found out in the middle of spring break that we were going to move to distance learning. It was on Thursday, March 12 when we decided to extend spring break an extra week. That was our first move to give our faculty, staff, and administration time to create a distance learning platform and to pivot in how our instruction was taught. That was our window of time to turn the ship around.

The executive team met first, and then they brought me into the loop shortly after. We knew we needed to move to distance learning and do it quickly. The principals were figuring out how we were going to do distance learning from a curriculum standpoint and worked closely with our director of technology to make that reality possible. Our communications team worked a lot with academics to help figure out what everybody was doing, how it was being rolled out, and how we could communicate clearly and effectively to make sure everybody was on the same page. It was roughly a ten day turnaround from when we heard, decided that we were moving to distance learning, and when we actually implemented it.

► **Tracy:** I really like that your school was deliberate about using the term distance learning instead of virtual learning. Can you walk me through why you chose the term distance learning?

► **Travis:** On our website we deliberately used the term distance learning rather than technology-specific labels such as "virtual learning," "e-learning," or "online classes." This choice reflects our conviction that quality learning can occur at a distance without solely relying on computers. Brook Hill's goal is for students to read, communicate, and engage in meaningful learning experiences, while continuing to be physically active and grow in their knowledge and love of Jesus Christ.

When our administration and executive team were talking about our distance learning program and what it would look like for us, we didn't believe that all learning would only be online. Of course online instruction is the primary form it took, but we decided to have students do other things outside of their computer. What we believe is core to Brook Hill education is relationships – not only between students, but also between faculty and staff. We wanted to create a platform that still facilitated relationships and gave students the opportunity to continue to connect with one another and with their teachers in meaningful ways.

► **Tracy:** What tools are you using for distance learning?

► **Travis:** In the lower school they are using Zoom and Seesaw. Middle and upper school are using Zoom and Canvas with FACTS SIS integration. We've also been using Flipgrid. This is a platform that allows students to upload videos and projects, and see what everyone else is doing. We wanted to continue connecting people. We incorporated Flipgrid for some of our innovation projects and extra things we have for students to do like the Lego challenge for lower school.

We also had a Digital Service Day. Usually, the Thursday of Easter is Maundy Thursday, the day where the church remembers that Jesus washed the disciple's feet. We always go wash the feet of our community. So we took that day and cancelled regular classes like we always do and encouraged students to do service projects for someone around the house or for a neighbor – something that would still involve social distancing. Then we invited them to share their videos on Flipgrid.

► **Tracy:** What are some things you've learned along the way?

- **Travis:** We've learned a lot. We've learned how to streamline the digital experience for families and how to consolidate assignments and lessons so that it's easier for a student to work independently.

We learned that student-teacher relationships still win the day. You can't teach the same way digitally, but you can still teach new content digitally. Teachers need to adapt how they teach, and students need to adapt how they learn, but great learning can still happen!

Families and students value transparency and authenticity over perfection. We don't have a perfect distance learning program. However, our families really valued our transparency, openness to feedback, and willingness to change to create a better experience for them.

► **Tracy:** How have your parents responded to your pivot to distance learning?

- **Travis:** Our parents have responded with overwhelmingly positive feedback. We send surveys to our parents, and our surveys indicate that over 93% of our families are satisfied or very satisfied with our distance learning program. Despite their positivity, it's obviously been difficult for everyone, so I don't want to skim over that. Our parents have been very gracious. Everyone knows we are all doing the best we can given our situation and the place that we find ourselves in.

Our parents have been very grateful that we have not stopped the progression of learning. Our students are still learning new material. We set up our learning in such a way that does not take up the whole day.

My son is in PreK, and of course we have to help him, but he is able to do a lot of the assignments by himself now. As we have gone through the process with Seesaw, he is able to log in to his Zoom and go to his morning class on his own. The teachers have pre-recorded instructions. He is able to listen to instructions, he is able to take pictures of his assignments, and then upload them. He still needs some help, but it is cool to see him do this and be somewhat independent.

We want to understand where parents are at. We want to try to make it as easy as possible for the child to work independently. Really, in addition to our teachers, our parents are the true heroes. They have been so supportive and helpful through this entire process.



► **Tracy:** You mentioned survey results earlier. Can you talk more about the surveys you sent to parents?

► **Travis:** We created a series of parent surveys to get a pulse of how parents and students have been dealing with this whole transition. If a family was dissatisfied and gave us their information, we followed up with each of them. Over 200 families participated in each survey. That's about 40-45% of our school families. We asked how satisfied they were with the distance learning program and if it was too much work or not enough. There are a lot of people who will say something in a survey that they may not say to you in person.

One of the things we have seen is that you often hear from the people that are upset. In administration you don't always hear a "good job" or a "thank you." As a school, we get stressed and we feel anxious when we hear from a family that we love who is having a hard time. But, when you do a survey you get actual data. You can see both sides of the spectrum, positive and negative. Our surveys were able to let us know, yes, there are a few families that are not having a good experience. Maybe both parents are still working or they have a lot of kids. Maybe technology is difficult for them or this is not what they expected or wanted. Those are the type of complaints that came through on our surveys.

But, there were other families that we were able to hear from that had a more positive experience. 93% of parents were satisfied or very satisfied with our distance learning program. That's a great number! That helps us narrow down who we need to focus on and really reach out to. The surveys were anonymous, but they could tell us their names if they wanted. A lot of families that had more critical feedback gave us their names and we were able to follow up personally. Our principals followed up with each of them.

We were able to segment the surveys to figure out how lower school families were feeling vs middle school vs upper school vs the boarding community. It helped us narrow down particular struggles within the different segments. It helped us make improvements so that we could continue providing an even better online platform.

It all comes back to customer service. We have gotten to a place where our families know what they are doing: they are in a groove and feel confident that they are learning great things. Their children's education is continuing and is still true to Brook Hill.

Another huge benefit that came from the surveys is that it allowed families to see where they fit in. Sharing the results allowed us to show families we were being authentic and transparent. The parents that were dissatisfied were able to see that not everyone was having the same experience they were having. There were unique challenges that made it more difficult for them. We were really able to figure out how we can help and make this distance learning better. It created a lot of trust in Brook Hill.

► **Tracy:** What are your top three tips for schools for doing distance learning successfully? Does that change depending on grade level (elementary school vs. high school)?

► **Travis:** The first bit of advice I'd like to give is stick to your mission. We have said through this whole process that our method had changed, but our mission remains the same. Distance learning still has to embody your school and its values. And you have to adapt it to a new medium. For us, one of our core values is the relational aspect of school. It is also being Christ-centered and being a college prep school. When we think about those things, obviously chapel is going to be really important to us. We still teach Bible lessons. We still need to be cultivating our student's character. We still have advisory groups that meet over Zoom. We are still doing all these things to continue cultivating relationships and to continue nurturing our students spiritually in this time. Also,



what's better college prep than being forced to learn more independently? It's hard for sure. Not only are teachers having to learn how to teach differently, but students are having to learn how to learn differently.

The next tip is clear communication. In a time of uncertainty and crisis, everything is new. With everyone working and learning from a distance, communication has to be even clearer. Everyone receives communication in different ways – email, website, videos, social media, texting, and apps. Families like some communication methods better than others, so we try to use all resources.

The last tip is cultivate community. Community is a big part of why people choose private schools. They are not just choosing private schools for a great education, they are choosing them for a community that fits their personality and their family values. For us, we really wanted to continue cultivating what we like to call “The Brook Hill Family.” While we’ve been disconnected physically, we’ve done a lot to remain connected with families. Here are a couple of things we’ve done: stories on social media and newsletters, yard signs for seniors, celebrating seniors, family trivia game nights, morning devotionals from the principals, parent-organized teacher drive-by parades, and video updates from the head of school. We’ve been building relationships through social media by commenting, replying, tagging, and resharing stories, etc.

► **Tracy:** How has FACTS helped you make the transition to distance learning?

- **Travis:** FACTS has been immensely helpful. We’ve been using Parent Alert during this season. It’s a quick, easy way to text all our families. We’ve been able to utilize the communication area in FACTS SIS to easily send communications to our families all at once. Our school app [FACTS Family App] is integrated with FACTS SIS as well, so that has been really great having another touch point and communication tool. We are currently doing a giving campaign, so we are able to partner the app and FACTS Giving. We’ve also been utilizing the Canvas integration with FACTS SIS.

► **Tracy:** What are your main methods of communicating with current families?

- **Travis:** Email, video, website, social media, texting, and our app. I’d say that email, texting, and our website are the three primary ways. We have two websites: our [main website](#) and the [distance learning website](#). Both of those have been key communication tools and platforms for us. It has been a great way for our families to stay informed and to find the information that they need. All of our major email communications sent out have been turned into webpages that you can access on our [COVID-19 resource page](#). Our lower school and middle school principals have done morning announcements that have been put on the [distance learning page](#).

► **Tracy:** How has your admissions process changed during this time? What has your team done to adapt to COVID-19 for admissions procedures?

- **Travis:** Our immediate need was to figure out how we were going to continue giving tours and taking families through the entire admission process virtually. Several schools say the main goal in admissions is to get families on campus. If we can get them on campus, we can sell them on our school. For us, as a boarding school, that hasn’t always been true. We’ve had to learn to sell to our school to students overseas and to students across the country in a virtual way. We’ve actually been well-versed in that area. We had to pivot our day admissions side to also incorporate the things from our boarding admissions standpoint, which we have been doing for a number of years.

We already had a virtual tour that our boarding admissions team uses. We worked with our day admissions team and they were able to put together their own virtual tour using videos and PowerPoint presentations for our day prospective families. Our goal was to create a tour experience that is unique, yet still Brook Hill. It's more than a simple PowerPoint presentation. We are trying to incorporate that personal relationship. If someone has more specific questions, we offer to schedule a Zoom or phone call with that person. We have a discovery call for someone that is not ready for a full-on tour. They may have browsed our website and had some initial questions or want to discover more about Brook Hill. We have that discovery call as a soft step.

We also have a virtual viewbook that families can download. All they have to do is give us their email and then they will get our drip campaign. We'll then email them a link that gives immediate access to our viewbook. In a few days they'll get another email that has an invitation to schedule a virtual tour, which introduces them to our admissions team.

A big part of what we want to do is to create steps in the sales funnel from the initial time they hear about us all the way until the moment they enroll. We want to craft a virtual experience that moves them through this process. Our [virtual admissions page](#) has been really important. We want people to know we are open, flexible, and adaptable. Some schools have not changed their admissions page since COVID-19 happened. If you don't have the capacity or resources to do that, it is totally understandable. But, if you are able to do that, I think it sends a signal to families that you are aware. It lets them feel more comfortable to go through the process.


► **Tracy:** What are your top tips for virtual admissions?

► **Travis:** First of all, don't be tone deaf to the situation. Be aware that families are feeling uncertain. Families may be anxious, but they still want to pick the right school for their family. They are still moving because they may be relocating for a job. They still are moving on to that next stage of school and want something more for their child. So, families in the midst of uncertainty are still out there and still want what you have to offer as a school.

Secondly, understand the situation, but don't give up. Stay true to your mission. Stay true to who you are. Find a way to adapt your admissions experience for the times.

Thirdly, we are in Texas and Texas is starting to open back up. We have started talking about what campus tours will look like moving forward. We are deciding what is best for our prospective families and what is best for our school. I think those are the kinds of conversations that schools need to be having to figure out what's going to work for their environments. How can they still be true to who they are but adapt themselves virtually?





Lastly, at the end of day, admissions is relational. Of course it's great to have flashy videos. It's nice to have a great website, but relationships and experiences are what bring people together and that stays true no matter what. No matter what your school can or can't produce, you can still create meaningful experiences and relationships for families digitally. As long as you can continue to focus on those things, I think you can still find success in the midst of this crisis.

► **Tracy:** Your school is unique in the fact that part of your school is boarding students. What happened to these students when distance learning started?

► **Travis:** All kinds of things. If you can imagine it, it happened. A lot have now returned home. A lot have extended families or close family friends in the United States and they are staying with them. Some have built strong relationships with day families and are staying at their homes. It was stressful for everyone, but we clearly communicated with them and their families. We had a plan. Our director of residence life was constantly speaking with our families to figure out the best place for everyone.

► **Tracy:** What are your top tips for marketing your school now with social media?

► **Travis:** There are two ways of thinking about goals for social media: internal and external.

You have your current community and I would call that internal. Our internal goals for social media are to continue to create connection and to build community with our families. That has definitely been a big part of what we have tried to do with our social media platforms on Facebook and Instagram. Of course we want to use those pages to communicate clearly and let our families know what is going on, but overwhelmingly our primary goal is to make them feel connected to our school and connected to their experience at Brook Hill.

The other side of social media is external. For us that comes primarily in the form of digital advertising. I think there is a lot of confusion out there. People think that posting on Facebook is marketing and I don't think it is. Posting on your Facebook page is for the people that follow you. People who don't follow you will not see your social media posts unless they go visit your page intentionally which means they are already checking you out. If you want to reach prospective families through social media, the real key is through advertising on multiple social media platforms. For prospective families, we try to reach out to them through digital advertising. We have a series of video ads, photo ads, all kinds of ads targeted to a bunch of different groups. Whether that be people that have visited our site or different demographics we have selected to target. Social media advertising is one of the primary ways we try to reach out to prospective families online.

► **Tracy:** How are you handling tuition payments for the remainder of 19-20 and how are you handling tuition payments for 20-21? What, if any, changes have you made?

► **Travis:** The majority of our families seem to not be experiencing a huge financial crisis but there are still a significant number of people who have been laid off. We have a lot of oil and gas families. That industry has crumbled over the last couple of months, so we have definitely had some economic hardships. But as a whole, I would say that our community is doing okay financially. Those that have had financial hardships or have been furloughed have asked for delayed payments. We have been working with them individually to see what their family needs. For some families it looks like delaying all payments and others it looks like reduced payments. We have entered into a campaign to raise \$150K for our families. We already had over \$100K raised for that. That's been a great way to continue meeting the financial needs of our community. Those that are not suffering can help those that are experiencing hardships. We can all work together as a community to make sure we can continue to provide a Christ-centered, college prep education.

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

- **Travis:** We anticipate a higher volume of requests and families that have requested aid in the past may be asking for more. We are working with everyone individually.
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► **Tracy:** How has FACTS helped you during this time with your tuition or aid processes?

- **Travis:** FACTS Grant & Aid Assessment has allowed us a lot of flexibility. We are able to go in and make adjustments for families' incomes so we have an accurate picture of their financial situation. Maybe what it was previously versus what it is now in light of COVID-19 or the oil crisis. FACTS definitely has some great tools. One feature we especially like in FACTS Grant & Aid is having the fund column so we know how much of our funds we have given away so far this year.

The integration with FACTS Enrollment has been really great. As soon as they have accepted an offer we are able to have that offer integrated in with their FACTS payment plan which has been immensely helpful.

► **Tracy:** As we wrap up here, I have one last question for you. What is the next big thing to focus on with distance learning?

- **Travis:** We are hopeful and optimistic that we will be back in the school and it will be totally normal in August. There is always a possibility that the governor will ask schools to close again sometime in the fall should there be a second outbreak. Luckily, we have the tools and structures in place to continue distance learning, not just take a break or hiatus, but actually continue learning at a distance if schools are to be closed again.

I think the next big thing is actually how schools will incorporate the new skills and benefits of distance learning when we go back to in-person classes. Our teachers have acquired new skills, our students and families have acquired new skills. I think what will really separate the great schools from the good schools is to see which are able to learn from this experience in terms of how distance learning is able to actually improve the overall in-person classroom experience. There are definitely some valuable things we have learned from this as educators, as marketers, teachers, administrators – our entire school has learned so much. It is going to be on us to not just go back to business as usual, but to take the golden nuggets we have been able to create and find in this trying time and figure out how to make our schools better because of it.

There are obvious disadvantages to distance learning, but there are a lot of positives as well. Schools will be distinguished by how they utilize these new methods in the future to improve the educational experience for everyone.

