




CASE STUDY

MOVING FORWARD WITH PURPOSE:
TRADERS POINT CHRISTIAN SCHOOL'S
TASK FORCE PREPARES FOR FALL 2020





Traders Point Christian School in Whitestown, IN, focuses their core values on training scholars, making disciples, and graduating leaders. Their mission is to challenge and educate students within a framework of a Biblical worldview while leading them to a personal faith and transformed life in Jesus Christ. The Christian school offers grades PreK-12 and they have 518 students enrolled.

Tracy Crawford, FACTS' K-12 customer relationship manager spoke to Paul Williams, head of school.

► **Tracy:** Thank you for joining me today! I'd love for you to share about your transition to distance learning and how you developed your plan for instructional continuity.

► **Paul:** Thursday, March 12 was the day we announced we were closing and moving to distance learning. [Our Continuity Plan](#) was two weeks in the making prior to when we closed. We had a short amount of time to prepare when we first started hearing about COVID-19. I want to give a good bit of credit to my IT director, Dr. Tom Ho. He was in early contact with schools in Singapore. We were in contact with private Christian schools and private secular schools there that were close to a month ahead of us in terms of planning and pandemic spread. A group in Singapore had put together a Continuity Plan and gave permission to share it with schools because they knew everyone globally would be facing this issue. We used some of the materials that they had and then made modifications to make it fit for us.


We sent a FACTS Parent Alert text notification asking parents to read a more detailed email we sent out through FACTS SIS, because I know it can take parents a long time to get to emails. Fortunately for us, we already had an E-Learning and Parent/Teacher Conference Day on the calendar on March 13. We ended up cancelling those events, but had the day to talk with teachers to walk them through the Continuity Plan and how we were going to execute it the coming week. The first thing I told my principals and then passed on to our teachers was, "If there was ever a time when parents are going to be very forgiving of us for failing on something, it's right now. So, let's be innovative and creative."

One of the most significant things we learned out of this is that the way you do distance learning for kindergarten and elementary grades is totally different than what you can do for high school. We did an exceptional job in fifth grade and above. Kindergarten through fourth grade took longer to figure out but our process gradually improved. We learned that the younger students needed a lot less screen time. We also learned that block scheduling worked well for the high school students.

► **Tracy:** Did you use Google Classroom for any of your grade levels?

► **Paul:** We used Google Classroom in fifth grade and up because we had not issued Gmail school accounts to K-4th grade. We tried Zoom meetings for those lower grades. We also have a Preschool which serves students eighteen months old through PreK. We kept just as much contact with them and provided distance learning activities for them. Our teachers did an amazing job with creative video interaction. I was amazed with what they were doing. The majority of those activities were facilitated through Zoom, but fifth grade and up used Google Classroom. Google Classroom had a lot of advantages but we did run into some things we could not control. We might have a family with both mom and dad working at home in a business-related industry and had three kids that needed their own devices and were using WiFi bandwidth in the house.

We learned the value of meeting with small groups within a class versus the whole class and whether to let the students mute their microphones or not. We learned how to teach lab-oriented classes in distance learning. We have a large emphasis on "Projects Lead the Way" in our school, which emphasizes very hands on approach. We have engineering, biomedical, and science classes that are all hands-on.



Initially, we wanted to structure school the same as on-campus scheduling with classes starting at 8 AM and ending at 3 PM with homework due during those hours. As much as possible, we wanted to be live with kids and keep that structure. We saw that our structure looked significantly different compared to other schools' plans, but in the long-term it was a good decision for us because our students stayed on a schedule. We believed they needed that structure and that consistent schedule during those months. It was really hard at first, but it was beneficial. We recognized that we had to make some adjustments and back off on some of the intensity of the expectations. We backed off on when homework was due and how kids could turn that in. Turning in homework was especially complicated for parents with younger kids. We made tweaks starting in week three that we kept in place for the duration of the semester.

► **Tracy:** How did your parents respond to your pivot to distance learning and did you have a way to get structured feedback from them?

- **Paul:** In the first survey we sent, parents were extremely gracious and kind about how quickly we had pivoted. It seemed as though we were doing more than majority of the neighboring public school systems. We are a school of 600 kids and can pivot pretty simply. It is probably more challenging to pivot a school system of 7,000 to 8,000 students. One of the things that makes private Christian education really valuable at this time is our ability to pivot.

One of our sample questions on the survey was, "On a scale of 1 to 5, how did this rollout go?" We received a 4.4 on average, so that was great. On the open-ended questions, we got feedback concerning schedule conflicts of parents working from home trying to help their kids and work at the same time. Some folks wanted us to back off on the rigor, but again, we felt like that is part of what we do and we wanted to keep that up.

► **Tracy:** What is your top tip for schools to successfully implement distance learning?

- **Paul:** Have a single platform or minimize your platforms because multiple platforms causes confusion for parents.
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► **Tracy:** What was your main method of maintaining communication with current families?

- **Paul:** Communication was my chief responsibility during this time. My early childhood, lower school, and upper school principals all contributed. We had done a weekly newsletter and that was our primary communication tool during the crisis. It was posted on our [COVID-19 landing page](#) and on social media. We did not have a cohesive communication plan prior, but we would like to do better in that area in the future.

We use the communication portal through FACTS SIS on a regular basis. Anything going to our parents will run through FACTS SIS, except for our newsletter which is produced through Smore. We pull the email addresses from FACTS SIS into that platform, so if we do update information in FACTS, it also updates in Smore. We also send the newsletter to an additional 100 people, including donors and other people interested in our school that are not in our SIS. We also used Parent Alert text notifications to notify parents of important emails. We really protect the use of Parent Alert. When a parent gets a Parent Alert from us, they don't ignore it.

► **Tracy:** How have your admission procedures changed during this time? What has your team done to adapt?

► **Paul:** Our advancement team put together [admissions and marketing videos](#). Considering they were done on the fly, I was pretty pleased with those. We are going to be more intentional about an ongoing presence with virtual tours that will be more extensive and more professional in its approach.

► **Tracy:** Do you have any suggestions for making an impact with virtual admissions?

► **Paul:** If you don't have a virtual tour, do it now. Build it when you don't need it, so it is there when you do need it. We didn't have one so we had to build it after we needed it. We are still getting a good number of admission contacts so we are encouraged by that. We are expecting to have a lot of encouraging feedback and people coming in once the school reopens in person.

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

► **Paul:** Currently, we handle social media within the school. We have a couple of folks on the advancement team that weigh in and really work hard on it. You might have seen how we celebrated our seniors--we had a really cool graduation at a drive-in movie theater. We had a group who livestreamed the event on social media. We had all the structure set in place for social distancing and got it approved through our local Health Department. The parents came to the parking lot and the seniors sat in front of their car in a chair. We had a stage and a big screen. We had 32 graduates who walked across the platform and got their diploma. There was cheering and honking! The valedictorian and salutatorian even got to give their addresses live. It was really cool!

► **Tracy:** What were some other virtual activities or events you felt were innovative and successful?

► **Paul:** Chapel. We had very positive feedback from our parents about having chapel every week, especially our lower school chapel. As we were getting into the second week of April we started doing our virtual chapel weekly and the parents loved it.

We did one other thing in May called Mile of Smiles. You saw how some schools drove through the subdivisions and honked at their kids. We have a spread on our campus that is about a mile from one entrance to the other, so we lined up our teachers there. Parents came and drove by. The kids were waving at their teachers. Parents said it took about 45 minutes to drive through because we had such a heavy line. We had over 500 people RSVP for this. The families and kids loved it.

► **Tracy:** Can you talk about your Task Force and how they prepared the plan for opening school for the fall 2020 semester?

► **Paul:** I am old enough to have finally learned I don't know everything. One of the biggest things I have learned is that I don't know all the questions. I wanted a group of parents that would spread from early childhood to high school and across different professions to ask questions like: What should we be thinking about? What should we be asking? The last thing I want to do is put together a plan that does not address everything. We know the common questions about masks and taking temperatures and social distancing. But, what are the other considerations?

I put in a request for volunteers in our newsletter and over sixty parents volunteered. I picked fifteen parents that represented different age groups. They represented single-child families and multi-child families. They represented a variety of different industries from the National Guard to healthcare to financial institutions to real estate. I gave them a framework to start with. I had twenty questions and they added another fifteen questions. Then we divided into four smaller groups and we tasked each group with a certain number of the questions. For example, we had a medical group and we tasked them with the questions around taking temperatures. What happens if we get a positive COVID-19 case identified in our group? There were a variety of other medical questions.

I had some members from our leadership team and two teachers on the task force. The teachers worked in a group that dealt mostly with the schedule and what it would look like if we come back on a hybrid schedule. We pretty much have it down if we do distance learning or meet face-to-face. The Task Force will make recommendations to the administration and then the administration will put together the plan and present it to the School Board. The Board got a rough draft of our plan three weeks ago and then a final draft shortly after. We are waiting for Boone County and the School Board to sign off. We also submitted to them a plan for our return to athletic practices and competition. The plan is in stages. If we are in a low to no transmission of the virus, we are business as usual. If we are in a moderate level of transmission, then it will be something between hybrid and in-person.

In our proposal to our School Board for distance learning, we recommended the purchase of a device called [Swivl](#). It has what they call a marker that hangs around the teacher's neck. Then you have a tablet on a tripod. The tripod rotates and follows the teacher. The teacher still gets to move around the classroom so if you have someone virtual, they can be online with you as if they were sitting in the class. That will work for seventh through twelfth grade. It doesn't work for first grade so we are looking at some more devices. If we do have someone who doesn't want to do face-to-face, we can offer that. Adjusting to this is going to cost all of us some money.



► **Tracy:** What does your enrollment look like right now?

- **Paul:** We actually had the best percentage of re-enrollment that we have ever had with our continual enrollment model up to March 12, which was the final day to opt out. Since then a few families have backed out. What we really believe is that families are still thinking about if we are really going to come back and what that looks like. I heard frequently from the Task Force that we have to let people know as early as possible what it will look like when coming back, because some families are on the fence.

Re-enrollment information is extremely powerful right now, more than maybe any other re-enrollment or admissions season. In all our budgeting, we are projecting a 10% decline. My optimistic side says that when we get the word out, we are going to, at a minimum, get back to where we were and possibly pick up some more students, especially if we do the virtual piece well. Having the Swivl devices may offer possibilities to parents who are scared and don't want to go back to a 4,000 student public high school with all its exposure. They may want to be in a smaller community and may think about coming to Traders Point face-to-face at Christmas. If we can get them online with us, then not too long down the road they will move in-house with us.

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

- **Paul:** We have an approved emergency COVID-19 scholarship amount that we are taking out of our operations fund. There is structure around how our finance office will make those decisions. What we have seen, and it has not been significant, is that if a family is struggling from COVID-19, they are not asking for a scholarship. They just step away. The financial support has not been effective yet to keep them here.
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► **Tracy:** What are the most important lessons you've learned over the past several months?

- **Paul:** Our Indiana ACSI Head of Schools have been meeting via Zoom on a weekly basis. I really encourage schools to partner with other schools and heads of schools to partner with other heads of schools. That has been huge. God controls my destiny, my end date. I can't fix that. I can put a bubble around it, but if my time is up, my time is up. So I can't feel responsible for that. But God calls us to care for those we have authority and rule over. In Romans, it talks about respecting those who God places us in authority over because they watch for our souls. I have a duty of care for the health and safety of my students and teachers. Sometimes that can be burdensome and being in that position can be lonely and stressful. So find those support groups and share ideas. If someone has already figured this out, adjust it to fit your school, but don't recreate the wheel. Finding those support groups is really important. Don't do it alone.



[Traders Point Christian](#) uses FACTS SIS, Tuition Management, and Premier Integration. They also use FACTS Grant & Aid Assessment, Application & Enrollment, Parent Alert, School Site, and FACTS Giving. They utilize FACTS' Incidental Billing and Advanced Accounting products.

