




## CASE STUDY

**TRANSITIONING TO A NEW NORM:**  
VERITAS ACADEMY'S  
JOURNEY TO VIRTUAL LEARNING





Veritas Academy in Austin, TX, offers three stages of learning and school levels: grammar, logic, and rhetoric. They value offering a classical education that fully integrates a Biblical worldview and focuses on helping students to become life-long learners, Christ followers, and responsible citizens. Veritas Academy has adopted a university-model approach to partner with parents and redirect some. The independent, Christian school offers grades Preschool through 12 and has 532 students enrolled.

Tracy Crawford, FACTS' K-12 customer relationship manager spoke to Veritas Academy's Katie Luevano, advancement director, and Jennifer Stewart, registrar.

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- ▶ **Tracy:** Thank you for taking time out of your busy schedule to speak with me. Tell me a little bit about yourselves and what roles you serve in your school.
  - ▶ **Katie:** I am one of seven administrators here at the school. My primary focus is on advancement. The advancement office includes marketing, communication, admissions, enrollment, development, and records. I work on strategies within these areas and then sync them all back to the overall school strategy.
  - ▶ **Jennifer:** I am responsible for the enrollment process and all student schedules. I handle initial advising for new students. I manage transfer credits, course requests, and transcripts. I oversee graduation requirements for seniors. I'm also the database administrator.
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- ▶ **Tracy:** How did you start preparing for moving to distance learning after your campus closed due to COVID-19?
  - ▶ **Katie:** Academics became the top priority for everybody in order to continue distance learning. A key to this was to identify one central hub and have one person take the lead. Our lead was Starrla Fowler, School of Logic head. She was already the administrator leading our academic team and works well with all school heads. It was a natural fit to have her take the lead. We met with the department head and deans for what the content would look like moving forward. We then had collaborative meetings that were developed off that. As the plan unfolded, there were lots of great ideas, but again, the key was to have one person filtering all ideas and developing a cohesive plan.
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- ▶ **Tracy:** What were your top priorities initially in responding to COVID-19?
  - ▶ **Katie:** First, we focused on moving everything to distance learning. Second, we wanted to continue to keep the head of school's voice in front of the community. Third, we wanted to maintain admissions momentum. We kept admissions open knowing that our enrollment goal is long-term and we wanted to continue our enrollment health. Lastly, we wanted people to see what we are doing during this time. We used a site alert to direct parents and students to a page with all the information they'd need. Our three major initiatives included: updates, Virtual Veritas, and prospective parents.
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- ▶ **Tracy:** How did your responsibilities for communications change versus how they were assigned during normal operations?
  - ▶ **Katie:** In our normal workflow, I would divide tasks. But during spring break, we were in crisis mode and did quick planning. I led the way. We have a main school newsletter released weekly on Fridays, so we relied on that to push out information. Since key information was coming out at the beginning of week, we moved the newsletter up to Wednesdays and clearly communicated changes to families.

Jef Fowler, our head of school, was our voice. He wrote a lot and collaborated on tone and messaging with the board president and me. We kept the circle smaller during the crisis. At first, the administrative team had daily huddles, but then as things settled down, we transitioned those meetings to a weekly schedule. Our head of school led very streamlined and productive sessions to review initiatives and identify priorities. Because of that, each day I knew what the administrators were working on and what would be finalized.

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► **Tracy:** How did you communicate with your families?

- **Katie:** We communicated information through our weekly newsletter as discussed before. We also used FACTS SIS' communication area to send emails. Our emails contained links to our website blog and our school memo page.
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► **Tracy:** Which tools are you using for remote learning?

- **Katie:** We've been using FACTS' School Site platform for our website. It was challenging because there were so many moving pieces. During the initial two weeks when we closed, I kept remembering in the book of Esther where it says, "... for such a time as this." Prior to the crisis, I had nit-picked the website because we had work that should be done. This is our brand. This is our tool. This is what we use. This is how it should look. And now, in this moment, we can see that it is all coming together. Since the School Site rewrap, we have worked to not have dead ends on website. All pages should be circulating to relevant information. In this case: updates, Virtual Veritas, and prospective parents.
- **Jennifer:** We've been using Google Suite. We opened ourselves up to options as far as using different tools to explore different functions. We first explored the classroom aspect. We needed a remote classroom. Several teachers had already used Google Meet in Google Classroom. We then determined that we needed Google Classroom set up for each teacher. I set up the Classrooms by teacher names instead of course so that a teacher would not be overbooked. I also taught teachers how to go into the calendar and create their Classroom so they would be the owner in case someone like a parent or a co-teacher of younger kids needed to be admitted to the Classroom.

Troy Schuknecht, our School of Rhetoric head and associate head of school, took advantage of the Google Classroom integration that FACTS offered. Melonie Elequin, our academic dean, took the lead on finding ways to train teachers. She teaches and can see Google Classroom from the teacher side.



Another resource we used is FACTS SIS lesson plans. Our normal process was for parents to view lesson plans on Family Portal. Our academic dean created templates for consistency. We continued this process for distance learning with simplified templates. The plans specify whether they are to do the work on their own, watch a video or meet in Google Hangouts, and they include the needed links. All teachers use the templates so parents know what to expect and where to find things. We simplified notes in homework such as, “Go to Google Classroom to take this exam,” and included the link to the exam. School of Logic begins in 5th grade, but students don’t get emails until 7th grade. All Logic students needed to be on Google Hangouts so I created a G Suite organization for just 5th and 6th grade with very limited access to only Google Hangouts and Google Classroom. This consistency helped teachers who taught all grades in the School of Logic. They did not have to modify their tools. It also helped parents with students in both 5th or 6th and 7th or 8th. Consistency is key.

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► **Tracy:** Do you think you will utilize virtual learning in the future?

► **Jennifer:** By no means do we want to be a virtual school when this is over, but it pushed us to explore and it will make us more effective as we go back to normal school. There are aspects we will take forward. Our academic team has been discussing what pieces will work when we go back to the regular classroom. We like the simplicity of kids accessing classroom folders and shared folders. We are hoping for less printing of documents. The teachers like sharing digital documents and leaving feedback for students. They like to have work turned in remotely, and they like the assessments, instant feedback, and the integration with FACTS SIS gradebooks. We are looking at ways to balance both in-classroom and virtual learning.

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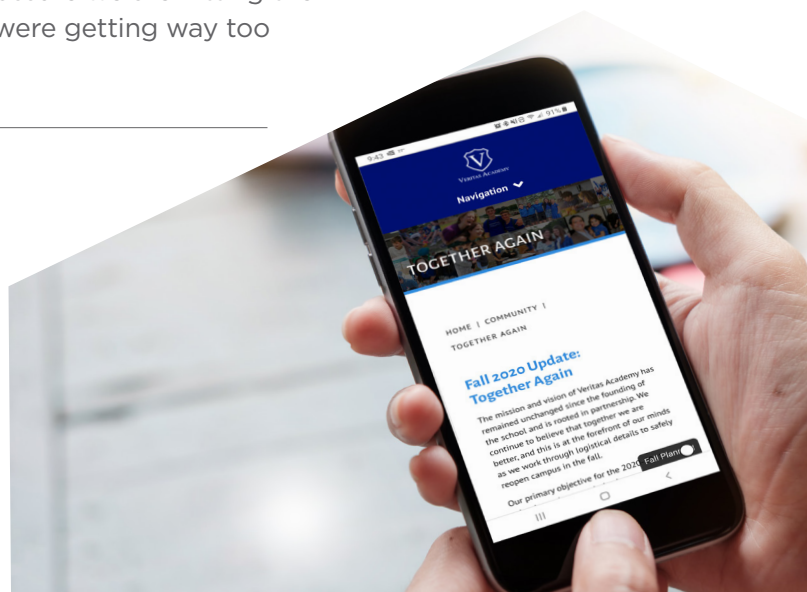
► **Tracy:** How have your parents responded to your pivot to remote learning? What are some things you’ve learned along the way?

► **Katie:** It has been a learning curve for everyone. Our parents are uniquely positioned for this. They are already committed to some portion of schooling at home since we are a University-Model School. We always described our community as pioneering spirits willing to embrace challenges and do hard things well. Those sound like buzz words and catch phrases, but for Veritas, these are not just catch phrases. This is who we are. We have been intentional about finding ways to connect with parents. We are not just assuming things are going well. Administrators have called to check on families. We created surveys with seven questions or less and asked families to give feedback. We included those surveys in our weekly email. We discussed those results in our academic team meeting and adapted our plans as needed. In our next communication with families, we closed the loop by letting them know, “This is what you shared with us and this is how we will address it.” We included graphics from the survey. Parents realized we were listening and increased participation in other surveys. We compiled our notes and surveys to assure we are hitting the right stride. For example, we learned some grade levels were getting way too much work.

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► **Tracy:** What are your top tips for schools for doing remote learning successfully? Does that change depending on grade level?

► **Katie:** Everyone has to be on same page. You have to understand that we cannot replicate the same experience as in the classroom. This creates a foundation that allows everyone to be on the same page. Then you can set priorities for your online



experience. We asked ourselves, “How can we be clear in actually helping them be successful, knowing it will be different?” There are multiple ways.

In our elementary lesson plans we set priorities. Teachers filter assignments through three levels to help parents prioritize and structure their days. If parents can only get one thing done, they will complete Priority Level 1. If they can get two things done, they will also complete Priority Level 2, even if inconsistently. If something needs to be omitted, parents can omit Priority Level 3.

Be very clear about time limits and expectations. The head of school helped assign time limits. Communication is key. Communicate often and well on multiple platforms always weaving in your mission. Have a central hub. Consistency is key! As much as you can, let there be a cascading effect from administration to faculty to parents. When we had the luxury to do this, we did. During the crisis when things were changing quickly, we told faculty there may not be time to give them a heads up, so to be sure to read the latest updates. We will try but cannot guarantee it.

Support and assist our parents, because our parents expect good training. Before school starts in the fall, we have grade level launches with an abbreviated schedule for parents and students to meet teachers, and talk through class procedures. We implemented a similar thing for our distance learning with a soft launch showing parents how to use Google Hangouts. We were able to identify and fix technical difficulties. It made the real launch so much easier.

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

► **Katie:** A lot had to change. We had admissions events scheduled in April. We had to pivot very quickly and we didn’t want to lose momentum. We had recorded a comprehensive meeting in January that helped us move everything online so we were in a good starting place. We weren’t trying to reinvent the wheel. We were using our normal message. Normally, for our physical events, we have an admissions sign-in page, a presentation, and a tour.

Post-COVID-19, we moved all our normal handouts online. We also created a virtual tour. We already had footage of our campus with students. During a collaborative meeting, we discussed what was needed and got those campus shots done right before we left the building. We also recorded the opening and closing just in case we needed it for the virtual tour. The video was created by merging the classroom footage with other footage we already had. We made the virtual tour a priority because a lot of admission and marketing webinars say this is a top thing. Everyone wants you to have a virtual campus tour. Showcase your campus with whatever you have, slide show, video, etc. Our virtual tour will still be a great tool even when we can resume in-person tours.

We have an upcoming meeting called Virtual Welcome Wednesday. We are still working on it to make sure we are confident parents are getting the information they need. We want it to be organized. When you sign in, you will receive links to our online event and a resource packet with grade level profiles so you can just open the grade level you want. Additionally, we want to set up YouTube lives and record it so we can start at different times during the day. We want to add structure and updates based on where we are now.

Our enrollment is up from last year overall. Things slowed down in April, but everyone that submitted and accepted is still moving forward. We are currently working on a communication piece to ask for a financial commitment for fall. Our fixed costs are facility and personnel so there is no wiggle room in budget. We are working on projects to outline our messaging around how we deliver value to families and what our differentiators are.

► **Tracy:** What are you doing to market your school differently? What are some of those differentiators?

► **Katie:** We've worked to identify the core values that have remained consistent for us through the years and made those relevant to this admissions season. We know families are enjoying this time with their kids, but maybe full-time home school is not for them. Veritas is the best of both worlds. We can take the load off their plates when it comes to curriculum and assessment. We want to have a true partnership with families.

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► **Tracy:** I'm glad your school is still accepting and processing admissions and that's great news about your enrollment. Has your message to families changed?

► **Katie:** Our message currently is to deliver quality education virtually, but we are not replacing anything from our original messaging or mission. We know families and students miss each other and miss being on campus. We will be putting a stamp on the commitment from teachers in our message. They have been doing wonderful planning and doing the best they can during a phenomenal pivot and crisis. They've showed lots of grace. But, if we are forced to come back in the fall and continue to work online, we have to really streamline and smooth it out for it to continue to be Veritas Academy in line with our message and vision. We are discussing what a staggered schedule would look like. We are exploring options while we figure out what our next step is.

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► **Tracy:** How are you handling tuition payments for the remainder of the 2019-2020 school year? And have you made any changes to tuition payments for the 2020-2021 school year?

► **Katie:** We are operating business as usual. Our payments start in April and end in February. On our phone calls to check in with parents, they said they are still doing well and coming back. But, this is a concern because we can't guarantee anything. It's extremely hard when we can't meet on campus to talk about things face-to-face.

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

► **Katie:** Families with income severely affected due to COVID-19 are able to reach out to our controller. There are a whole variety of scenarios. The controller will maintain that list. It will be shared with the finance committee who is tasked to determine policy and figure out what the process will look like. It will also be shared with me to determine how the controller will communicate with families. The controller considers both the policy and the relationship. Our goal is that we can all stay on board.



► **Tracy:** Are you still fundraising?

- **Katie:** We are still fundraising. We created an appeal campaign called The Bridge Fund using FACTS Giving which lasted until the end of the school year on May 22nd. This appeal is being made in an effort to keep our community intact for the coming year. We also did a soft launch in FACTS SIS communications.

Something that we are really having fun with is our online spirit store. The store has items that can be worn at home as a “school uniform.” The kids have been wanting it for a while and now we finally have it. All of the proceeds go to the Bridge Fund. The only setback in fundraising is our big fundraiser in April was cancelled so we were unable to meet our Annual Fund goal before we switched our focus to the Bridge Fund. We are reaching out to sponsors from the cancelled event to see how they want to handle their sponsorship money.

► **Tracy:** Thank you so much for speaking with me today! Do you have any final thoughts?

- **Katie:** Our school has had to pivot a lot in the last few years while building a new campus. We learned many things that strengthened us and prepared us for this crisis. We were casting a vision in a way that builds a community, but we learned not to make promises on things we cannot control. We point them to the right direction in where their hope is found. We learned to be very transparent, but concise. People will get lost if your communication is too long. It's important to be mission forward, stay true to who you are, and be clear. We need to be open and honest and willing to be transparent without appearing like we have it figured out if we don't. Figure out what you can do, stick to that, and keep information in a central place.

In this crisis, everyone knew where to go because of all the work that had been done prior on our website. Our community knew they could count on good communication coming through and they knew where they could find it.

