

FIRST PERSON

Courage, gratitude, and resilience

Sinai Schools looks at the lessons the pandemic teaches

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In early March, as the realization set in that we at the Sinai Schools would have to move to online learning at all of our schools, it became apparent that we were living through history.

Sinai operates seven schools across New Jersey and the New York metropolitan area; all of them serve children who have a broad range of complex learning disabilities and special needs. At first, as our schools moved one by one to remote learning, it was impossible for us to envision how we would serve our children under the current circumstances, provide them with the therapies each of them need, and keep them moving forward academically.

We recognized the importance of continually assessing how we as an organization were responding to the crisis, so from the outset we began reaching out one by one to our staff and to as many Sinai parents as possible, and chronicling their experiences in real time. Although the school year ended a few weeks ago, we continue to touch base with our educators, therapists,

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Teachers added extra periods and community-building meetings, like this art class.

and parents; remaining in contact with them even over the summer is especially important this year. Since March, the types of concerns and anxieties we have heard change from week to week. What our families share with us is often deeply personal, and it is humbling to be let into their private thoughts in this way.

What we have found, throughout the months since the pandemic changed all of our lives, is an extraordinary lesson in courage, gratitude, and resilience. There have been great struggles along the way, but at this point we are able to look back and see certain themes emerge. Those themes tell us a great deal about our students, parents, and dedicated educational staff.

Theme 1: Rising to the challenge

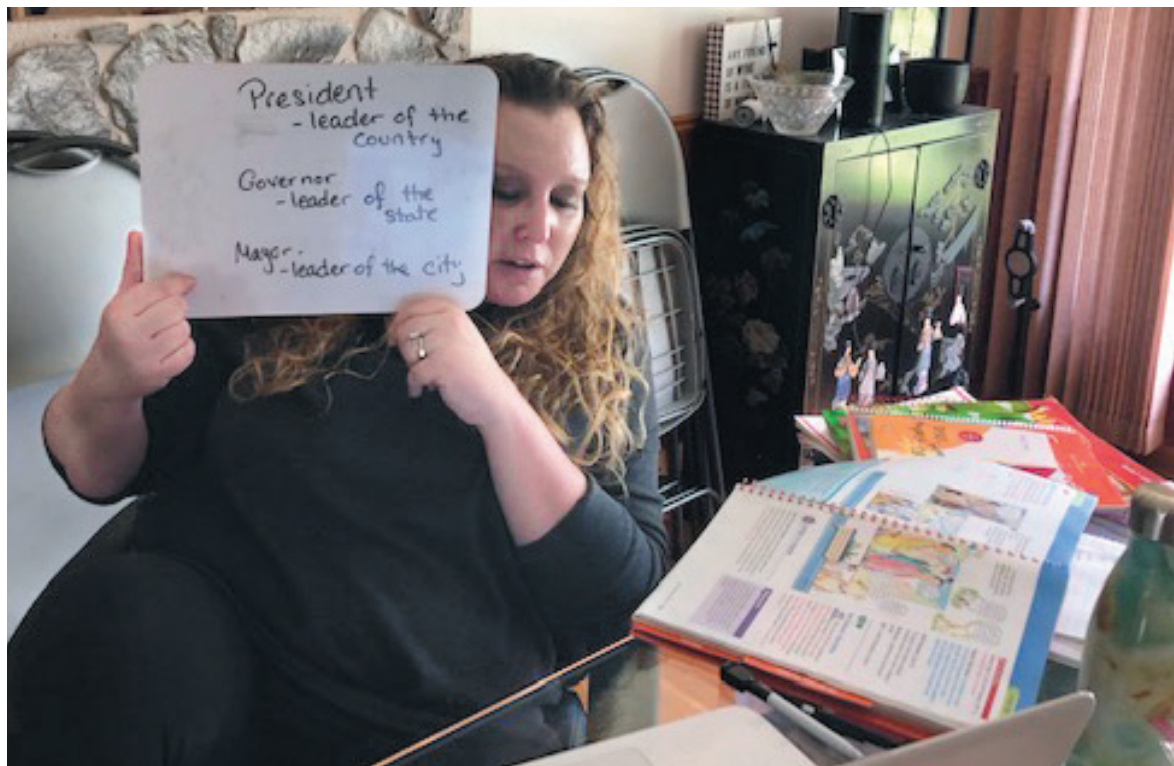
We heard it from parents, teachers, therapists; in fact, we heard it from virtually every person we spoke with: “I didn’t believe it could be done.” Across all of Sinai’s schools, many of our students struggle with executive functioning: organizational skills, flexible thinking, self-control, and focus. Parents could not imagine how their children could sit still, let alone learn through a computer screen. And yet, across the board, on the first day of remote learning, everyone – educators, parents, and students alike – took a deep breath, and dove in.

And our children rose to the challenge.

Certainly, there were some students who have struggled in this landscape more than others, particularly those with physical disabilities for whom keyboarding and working on a device poses yet another layer of challenges. But over and over we heard from teachers and parents that the children had surprised them, and not just with how quickly they adapted to learning online.

“They have had to jump in, step it up ... and I can honestly say that each and every student has been unbelievable,” Ilana Picker, a teacher at Sinai at Ma’ayanot in Teaneck, told us about eight weeks in. “I feel like taking that control away has given them so much more responsibility and enabled them to rise and do what they have to do.” Many parents told us that they hadn’t realized how well their children could follow directions, or how supportive and strong the friendships with their classmates were. “I just love when I catch snippets of the kids praising each other for getting an answer right, or helping each other with a hard problem,” one mother told us. “Once, my daughter was stressed because her Zoom link wasn’t working. But when she finally got into the class, the other kids all said, ‘Oh good, you made it! I’m so happy!’ which relieved all of her tension.”

“Never underestimate what our students can accomplish,” is a mantra at Sinai. Even so, this was a lesson that crystallized over the course of the lockdown, as



Teachers worked hard to make sure the students understood the material.

parents and teachers witnessed the children strive higher and higher, and surpass expectations.

Similarly, it didn't take long for our teachers to realize that they had underestimated themselves. Even those who described themselves as technophobes accepted the new reality and pushed past their discomfort, figuring out new programs and approaches that would work for their students online. "I told my kids, you can learn a little at a time. You may not get it perfect, but what's important is how hard you try," said Chandra Lall, a Sinai middle school teacher at the Joseph Kushner Hebrew Academy in Livingston. "And then I realized everything I was telling them I needed to hear myself."

Theme 2: Determination and dedication

"The fact that our students have been able to succeed over the past few months is really a testament to their grit and determination, and the dedication and constant encouragement from our teachers," Sinai's dean, Rabbi Dr. Yisrael Rothwachs, said. Our students are faced with challenges every day, and learning online was yet another new obstacle for them to overcome. "So much of the support we give to our students is through nonverbal cues, which won't work on Zoom," Rabbi Rothwachs noted early on, when we still were very skeptical about how online teaching could work. But our teachers and therapists worked hard from the very beginning to reinforce the idea that that giving up



The author and Rabbi Dr. Yisrael Rothwachs discussing feedback from parents.

was not an option, and the students took that to heart. "I remember, Rabbi Rothwachs told all of us: We are Sinai, we don't give up," Meira Cohen, who teaches at Sinai at Kushner, said. "I took that to heart, and told my students, 'We're all in this together, and we're all going to come out of this stronger.' And they believed me, which helped me believe it myself."

Judi Karp, Sinai's associate dean, described the transition to online learning at the beginning as "controlled chaos." About seven weeks in, she described how the teachers still were constantly adjusting how they presented material or worked with specific students. "They see what is working, what is not working, and they are determined to come up with ways to reach our kids," she said.

The dedication of the teachers and therapists led

many of them to change around their lessons, add sessions, and prepare for their classes late into the night. "I'll do whatever I have to, to make sure my boys and their families are doing ok," Dr. Yaacov Weiner, the school psychologist at Sinai at the Torah Academy of Bergen County in Teaneck, said. In order to promote a continued sense of community and togetherness, Dr. Weiner added Zoom lunch get-togethers for the TABC Sinai students, as well as a singalong kumzitz period every Friday, which he occasionally extended to Sinai alumni and students in other Sinai schools.

That level of dedication was true across the board, at all of our schools. Our mental health professionals added extra counseling sessions and regular – in some cases, daily – check-ins with our parents, to provide support and make sure everyone was coping at home.

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Teachers took over groups of students they had not originally been assigned to, in order to keep the groups small and to share the burden with their co-workers. Many of them added one-on-one sessions to students whom they saw needed the extra attention, even though it added many more hours to their work week. “Our staff always works hard, but the hours and dedication they have put in to make sure our children succeed during this crisis is really mind-blowing,” Rabbi Rothwachs said.

Theme 3: Gratitude

Throughout this difficult time, it was especially gratifying to hear our parents express their gratitude to the teachers. Many of them told us that they had never realized how skilled and loving the teachers were until they peeked in on their children’s classes, and watched the lessons themselves.

“Now I see firsthand the teachers, how they speak to the students, and what they are doing for Baruch each day,” Malky Jungreis, whose son is at Sinai at TABC, told us. “It gives me a glimpse to see how really amazing and superb each staff member in Sinai is.” Yocheved Gross, who has two sons at Sinai in Kushner, said, “The teachers love my boys so much. It comes through the screen. I can’t express how much that means for me to see.”

Throughout this period, students sent notes or photos and sometimes even videos to teachers, telling them how much they missed them, and parents were generous with notes thanking the Sinai staff for their dedication. “You have shown us that success is achievable with hard work,” Sinai parents Malkie and Boruch Adler wrote us as the school year drew to a close. “You have taught her what it means to advocate for herself and to be independent. Most importantly, you have helped to restore her self-esteem and self-worth. There are no words to express our thanks.”

But the gratitude that was expressed—not only from parents, but from our staff as well—was broader than this. No matter how difficult things were, it seemed that people found a way to be thankful for what they had. We spoke to parents who had lost their jobs, who lived in cramped quarters, or who had multiple children with special needs at home. We spoke with teachers who had lost a loved one to the virus, or who had taught while battling covid themselves. Yet even they found reasons to be grateful. “We have a backyard.” “All of our children are helping each other.” “We have dinner together every night.” “Being at home allows me to focus more on the kids.” It was heartwarming to see how just about everyone sought a way to recognize a light within the darkness.

Theme 4: Faith and a sense of calm

How do you maintain equilibrium and calm during a pandemic, especially when you have a child with special needs? Those we spoke with who seemed to have the greatest sense of calm and happiness usually were the same people who accepted that they were not in control. Rabbi Yehuda and Laurie Minchenberg have three children at Sinai, and in the early days of the lockdown we asked them how they were staying sane at home. “It’s very clear that we are just not in control of the situation,” Rabbi Minchenberg told us. “While it’s debilitating, at the same time it’s somehow freeing to know that it’s completely b’yidei Shamayim.” In God’s hands.

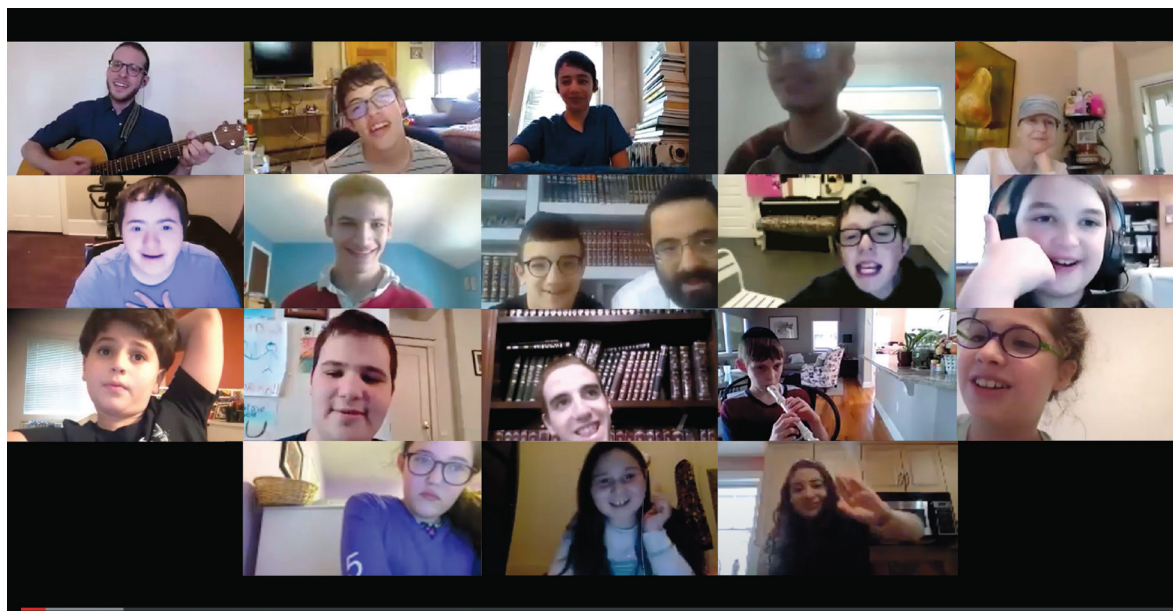
“I think parents of children with special needs know how to focus on the things that really matter,” Rabbi Rothwachs said. “They have the broader perspective, and they are used to the curveballs that life throws at



Finding happiness in the little things



Students sent notes and photos to their teachers expressing their gratitude.



Dr. Weiner’s community-building kumzits.

them and at their child.” Actually, that may make it easier for them to accept that there are things they can’t change, including control during this pandemic.

Perhaps the clearest expression of faith came from Rabbi Mark Karasick, who is the chairman of the board of Sinai Schools. “Over Pesach, I really could feel God’s hand controlling the world,” Rabbi Karasick said. “I have been a part of Sinai for almost 40 years, through good times and through some very bad times. I have always believed that HaKadosh Baruch Hu” – God – “is watching and protecting us. He is watching over our children and over Sinai now, as He always has.”

What we didn’t anticipate when we started this self-assessment project was that listening and responding to the thoughts and mindsets of so many people would have the effect of influencing the way we view ourselves, not only as an organization, but as

individuals as well.

Speaking personally, I believe that I have learned something new from every single person I have spoken with, and often these conversations have changed the way I reacted to my own struggles during this pandemic. Just over a month ago, I had just finished talking with a teacher who told me how the pandemic has forced her to slow down and appreciate the world around her, and I couldn’t help thinking, “I wish I could be as Zen as she is.”

Just then, a baby fawn and its mother crossed past my dining room window, where my work-from-home desk is set up. My normal instinct is to keep working, to ignore everything around me, and just to plow through what I have on my plate.

But the irony was rich, and her words sunk in. I closed my laptop, stood up at the window, and watched.