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Distance learning announced for remainder of school year

Gov. Walz also announces some businesses can open

Hannah Davis
News Editor

Gov. Tim Walz announced on Thursday, April 23, there will be an extension to distance learning for schools across the state for the remainder of the school year.

“As a former teacher, this is a heartbreaking decision,” Walz said. “I am sorry for all of our students who will miss out on graduations, tournaments, and end-of-year celebrations.”

Distance learning was set through May 4 in accordance with the stay-at-home order. Walz said that the current stay-at-home order is still currently set to end May 4.

While the announce-

ment was expected by many, it didn’t lessen the blow to area students, teachers and administrators.

“It certainly comes with a great deal of sense of loss for our teachers, school communities and students and families in terms of the connection that kids have with our teachers and staff,” said Steve Massey, superintendent of Forest Lake Area Schools.

Forest Lake Area High School will still have its graduation ceremony on June 5 as scheduled but is planning a virtual graduation ceremony. Massey said other options for graduation celebrations are currently being evaluated.

Executive Director of North Lakes Academy Cam Stottler said: “NLA feels sorrow towards not having the ability to interact with our students and families face to face,

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Submitted photo
Tally Nesvold, a junior at Lakes International Language Academy, uses the kitchen stove as her “school desk” as she finishes her schoolwork.

Distance learning unique for students of different ages

Families work together and work with teachers.

John Wagner
Sports Editor

Editor’s note: This is the second story in a two-part series focused on distance learning practices in area schools. Last week’s story looked at how distance learning affected area teachers and can be found in the April 23 issue of the Forest Lake Times or at tinyurl.com/y7tgs3wa.

The Dickey family has been obeying Gov. Tim Walz’s executive order by staying home, and that has produced an unexpected benefit for the Forest Lake family.

“I can’t remember the last time we didn’t eat dinner together as a family,” father Joel Dickey said. “Back in the times when I was working [as a nurse in a St. Paul hospital] and the kids were in school, we hardly were able to eat a meal together. Now we can have that intentional family time, and that’s been great.”

Joel and his wife, Sarah, have three children attending North Lakes Academy: Son Brayden, who is a sophomore; daughter Bella, who is in seventh grade; and son Braxton, a first grader. So when school was in session, mornings involved transporting the trio to school and afternoons involved shuttling Brayden and Bella to separate basketball practices while picking up Braxton from school.

And if that was not enough chaos, the Dickey family has two toddler sons, 3-year-old Briggs and 2-year-old Bowen.

“Normally we would be having to ‘divide and conquer,’ running around to different basketball courts to make it to games and practices,” Joel said.

Then came COVID-19. Students from the North Lakes Academy, as well as from Lakes International Language Academy in Forest Lake and the Forest Lake area school district, saw their school buildings closed in mid-March in response to the pandemic.

Now parents around the state continue to navigate uncharted waters brought about by this change, which Walz announced last week would continue until the end of the 2019-20 school year.

Both students and parents are adjusting to the “new normal.” But that adjustment period has not always been a smooth one.

“The first week or two that the kids were home from school, I was playing the role of drill sergeant,” Joel said. “I told everyone what needed to be done and when – and it just didn’t work. So I asked them to write their schedules down and explain how they would be able to check all the boxes and get their work done.”

So Joel was given a new job title in the home.

“Executive facilitator of encouragement and daily flow,” he said with a laugh.

Learning at the upper levels

When distance learning was implemented, LILA junior Tally Nesvold got a job at Target.

“I was a lifeguard at the YMCA, but then they closed – and I needed something to fill my day,” she said. “I needed something to keep me busy and keep me sane during this isolation.”

Before the stay-at-home order, junior high and high school students at LILA would start the day at 7:49 a.m. with an advisory period, followed by seven class periods that ended at 2:15 p.m. Now Nesvold said her “school” day starts around 8:30 a.m. and finishes around noon.

“I need structure to my day,” she said. “I don’t like sleeping in. I don’t find it easy, but I’m pretty motivated student, so I’m driven to do the work.”

Nesvold, who has excelled in academics, said she’s noticed how hard the teachers are working.

“E-learning can be very high quality if you give it time,” Nesvold said. “Our teachers are doing really creative things to teach us: They find a video online, or they make a video themselves teaching something.”

Erin Maher, a teacher at LILA, said the success of distance learning is largely because teachers and students had six months to build solid relationships prior to the shutdown.

“In my case, students aren’t afraid to send me an email to ask questions,” Maher said. “They are comfortable enough to admit, ‘I have no idea what you’re asking,’ because they know I will help them. If this was early in the year, and teachers and students didn’t know one another as well, it might be harder for us to help them.”

Distance learning has underscored how the use of technology is more frequent in the upper school levels. High school and junior high students are used to using Google Classroom or other tech aids during lessons, while elementary students generally are not.

“Our high schooler and middle schooler are better at working independently and getting their work done,” Sarah Dickey said. “Our first grader needs help in keeping focused on tasks; one of us normally is working with him, while the other one keeps the little ones busy with crafts or playing outside.”

But not all students are sufficiently focused to work independently. And while technology is very effective in some areas of study, Nesvold said foreign language classes such as her Spanish class at LILA are not perfect.

“Our teacher posts a video with her lesson instructions for the day,” Nesvold said. “So we get that listening component. But we don’t get that speaking component. Right now we’re reading a book and answering questions, so we do get the reading and writing component.”

For Nesvold, distance learning can be easier or harder than working a classroom based on one thing: how well her internet is working.

“I don’t have any distractions

Families adapt see page 3



Submitted photo
Gabby Walrath was looking forward to returning to the field this spring after missing the Forest Lake girls lacrosse team’s state tournament contest last year.

MSHSL cancels spring sports season

John Wagner
Sports Editor

For Gabby Walrath, this spring’s lacrosse season was supposed to be a second chance.

Last spring the Forest Lake senior suffered deep bone bruising and severe ligament damage in the Rangers’ section semifinal win over Centennial. The injury, which at one point turned her left leg black and blue from her ankle to her knee, caused her to miss the overtime win over Champlin Park in the section final as well as Forest Lake’s first-ever state tournament appearance against Maple Grove.

“I did not have to have surgery, but I had physical therapy three times a week for the entire summer,” Walrath said. “I missed playing in the summer with a team called the Stillwater Eagles, and in gymnastics I kind of laid back so I could be healthy for the lacrosse season. It was a long, painful battle, but I was ready to come back.”

This year would’ve given Walrath one final chance to play lacrosse. Her hope was to help the Rangers return to the state tourna-

ment so she could experience it on the field instead of from the sidelines.

And then came the first gut punch: On March 15 the Minnesota State High School League suspended the start of the spring sports seasons when Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz gave the order to close schools and begin distance learning.

“When I heard the news that we could possibly not have a season, I was scared,” Walrath admitted.

So she knew there was a chance she and the rest of the Rangers might not return to action this season. But that did not soften the knockout blow when the MSHSL announced on Thursday, April 23, that all spring sports and fine arts activities would be canceled in 2020. That decision came just hours after Walz ordered Minnesota schools to remain closed for the rest of the academic year.

“When I got the news, I definitely shed a lot of tears – my heart was broken,” Walrath said. “I’m not mad, but I’m upset that I’m

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Families adapt

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at home besides the dog,” she said.

But Nesvold is quick to add that she is not a fan of distance learning.

“School is not just about learning content,” she explained. “It’s about learning social skills, and I really enjoy seeing my friends every day. I enjoy collaborating with them, learning with them. And I can no longer do that.”

Lower level learning

Every day is a new adventure for Kate Luthner, who is a Forest Lake Area school board member, and her three daughters, who are in sixth, fourth and second grade at Lino Lines Elementary.

“The first couple of days were a roller coaster,” Luthner said. “We had spring break just before [school buildings closed], and they had been out of school for two weeks before we got our hands-on learning materials. So we were excited to start. But on that first day, when we actually had materials in hand, it was a reality strike: How were we going to execute this thing in front of us?”

For the Luthner girls – sixth-grader Niamh, fourth-grader Zoe and second-grader Fiona – there have been some adjustments to having their house become their school.

“My second grader has a bell on her desk, and she rings it when she is done,” Luthner said. “I have no idea where she got this bell. It appeared out of nowhere.”

Even though the three girls are part of the same school, distance learning has taken on different forms. For example, Niamh and two of her friends created their own study group.

“They use Facebook Messenger to go through their homework together,” Luthner said. “For me, it’s almost hands-off; they know what they’re doing, and they are academically strong. My only concern was that they might miss something on their to-do list.”

Things are a little different for Zoe in fourth grade.

“She needed a little more hand-holding, but her teacher should get an award for organization,” Luthner said. “When I handed her the packet, she realized that she started from the top and worked through to the bottom.”

Things are very different for Fiona in second grade.



Submitted photo
Fiona Luthner, a second grader at Lino Lakes Elementary, does some reading in her special reading space.

“I’m not actually holding her hand, but I’m close to it,” Luthner said. “For roughly two hours I’m no farther away from her than the doorway. She can read everything, and once she gets started on a paper, she can go through it. But she needs help finding the next piece of work to do.”

Kyla Johnson, who leads a sixth grade Spanish immersion class at Forest Lake Elementary, said students tell her the hardest part of distance learning for younger students comes when they have a question.

“Students just can’t get that immediate response, that immediate help,” Johnson said. “There’s nothing like being in school, raising your hand, and getting immediate help.”

And parents worry about walking the fine line between handing their children answers to questions and helping them find the answers themselves.

“I can explain how to do the work, but I’m not sure if my answer will help my girls understand the concept,” Kate Luthner said. “So I have them call the teacher, and they worked together to not just solve the problem, but also learn the lesson.”

That is not the only adjustment parents must make in this new learning environment.

Parents adapt

Luthner said the pandemic has changed her role in her daughters’ educations from a more reactive position to a proactive one.

“Before distance learning began, I would look at what they brought home – the product of their work – and ask them questions about it,” Luthner said. “I was checking in on what they’re doing, praising them for good work, and asking if they needed help in a certain area.”

“Now I kind of like being proactive: I can sit in on a lesson, and see if they compre-

hend it. My oldest takes charge of her work, so it’s less proactive, but for my two youngest I can be involved in their daily education.”

For the Dickey family, distance learning in a full house is starting to get smoother after beginning with a few ups and downs.

“People were trying to call dibs on the laptops,” Sarah Dickey said. “Little kids were crawling onto the table; it was a bit of a circus that first week. It’s been good overall, but we’ve had some laughs and had some cries.”

And if there are problems with technology, distance learning can break down.

“Our first week, Schoology [a social networking service and virtual learning software] was overloaded because so many more people than normal were using it,” Dickey said. “But our high schooler and middle schooler were a help because they were comfortable using that technology, so they were able to navigate through problems.”

Dickey said at first he was bothered by the expectation of matching the skills of the teachers of his three school-age children. Now he feels he

has a better understanding of what his children need to do to succeed.

“Hearing, ‘That’s not how Mrs. So-and-so does it,’ is becoming my least favorite phrase from my first grader – or my high schooler,” he said. “We have been working on helping our first grader understand that there’s more than just one way to skin a cat. But I’m learning that I have to see their world through their eyes instead of trying to control everything. That helps them develop their own process.”

In other words, parents are learning they do not have to be the “teacher” for their children, but they do have to provide support for the learning process and their children’s learning needs.

“Our teachers told me, ‘If they’re getting overwhelmed, have them stop,’ and, ‘If they’ve done enough for the day, don’t worry about it,’” Luthner said. “We’re all on ‘Team School.’ It’s not teachers vs. parents or parents vs. students. I’ve gotten a good sense that we’re all in this together, and we are working to make it work for everybody.”

Joel Dickey agreed, adding, “Personally, I admire our teachers’ ability to adjust to each individual student. As a surgical nurse, every day I have to navigate patients through the surgical process. Teachers have to do that for all of their students, and that’s pretty amazing. They are very special to be able to do that for all students every day.”

Luthner said her biggest fear as distance learning continues is that parents and students who are having trouble with the process will stop trying to find ways to be success-

ful.
“My worry is that people will silently, passively give up,” she said. “I hope [people with problems] contact their teachers, because it may be a problem for others.”

For Nesvold, her biggest concern is having to rehash a lot of the content she is learning now when schools – hopefully – reopen in September.

“I would hope everyone – both teachers and students – would be excited to be back at school,” she said. “But I think it might be a bit overwhelming to catch up on the content we might be missing.”

Dickey hopes distance learning may lead to changes in the school calendar by giving administrators a chance to look at other options, especially the 8 a.m.-to-2 p.m. school day.

“It has given us a better look at the pace of school,” he said. “If students are done by noon, I wonder if there’s a lot of redirection to keep them engaged during the rest of the school day. And I’ve noticed that sometimes work can be done at 6 p.m., so it is outside the boundaries of a normal school day.”

And speaking of the new normal, Sarah Dickey said she feels they will be something her family never forgets.

“When they are older, our children are not going to remember this time by thinking, ‘What classes did I have? What homework did I do?’” she said. “They’re going to remember the fun things we did as a family, like bonfires on school nights. It’s not about being perfect with school; it’s about cherishing this time and coming together as a family. That’s what kids are going to remember.”



Submitted photo
Distance learning has given the Dickey family a chance to reconnect at the dinner table. From left are Briggs, Bella, Bowen, mother Sarah, Braxton, Blake, Brayden and father Joel.

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