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Forest Lake orchestra teacher Poji Schreiber conducts an online lesson.

Submitted photo

Distance learning challenges area teachers

Technology, collaboration playing key roles

John Wagner
Sports Editor

Editor's note: This is the first story in a two-part series focused on distance learning practices in area schools. Next week's story will look at how distance learning affects area students and parents.

On the first day of distance learning, Forest Lake orchestra teacher Poji Schreiber enjoyed the challenge.

"The first day I thought, 'This is new and different,'" Schreiber said. "On the second day, I was in tears. This is so sad; I miss making music with my students in person. It's different, and it's a challenge."

Schreiber is not alone. Teachers from the Forest Lake school system, as well as from Lakes International Language Academy and North Lakes Academy, all are navigating uncharted waters brought about by distance learning. Schools around the state have been closed since mid-March in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the decree by Gov. Tim Walz to stay home.

"I get kind of emotional sometimes," LILA social studies teacher Erin Maher said about the decision to close the schools. "When we first got the word, we were approaching spring break, and at that time in the year, everyone – teachers and students – is ready for spring break to refresh, to get ready for the final push of the school year."

"So when we came back to school and had our first video conferences, I just wanted to hug all my students and say, 'What's going on? How is your life?'"

Distance learning provided a

unique challenge for area teachers who had set lesson plans for classrooms full of students. Suddenly their classrooms are empty because of the stay-home order, but the curriculum still must be taught.

"When we got the word about distance learning, I thought about teachers who are in their first year – I can't imagine how they're feeling," said Kyla Johnson, who teaches a Spanish immersion sixth grade class at Forest Lake Elementary.

Here is how area teachers are bringing their classroom curriculum into their students' homes.

Preparing the lessons

Prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, area schools dabbled in distance learning by preparing curriculum for snow days. But teachers agree that the current situation is far different.

"Snow day work was meant to be a stop-gap assignment," Maher said. "Also, on a snow day you may have students who can't do the work because they don't have power or access to the things they need to complete the work. It was meant to give those who have access to the assignment an opportunity to complete it."

Johnson agreed, adding: "We did have some resources put together for snow days. But this is such an extended period of time, we knew we would have to continue teaching our content rather than teach something for one random snow day here or there."

There was one advantage the preparation for snow days provided: Teachers better understood best practices involved with remote lessons.

"We learned that the key is to prepare a lesson that a student can easily understand without face-to-face contact with teachers," Maher

said. "You can't just give them a worksheet; you have to provide decent directions so students know what to do. You have to be mindful of the age of the student you are working with, so you give them the support they need to understand and complete the assignment."

Before teachers began to migrate their lesson plans from classroom instruction to online education, they tried to collaborate with everyone involved in the process.

"When we were first getting hints that [distance learning] might be a possibility, we all started to come together to talk about how this would work," Johnson said. "The first step was to communicate with families to find out what they would need to make the best of this situation."

Maher said teachers took that communication and worked with other teachers to form guidelines for instruction.

"We got into small groups and everyone was adding ideas," she said. "Whether it was applications or technologies to use, people were sharing – and they weren't getting a stipend for being a tech person. They would make tutorials that said, 'This is easy, and here's how you do it. I feel I could email or text someone, and they would support me and teach me how to share it with my students.'"

And the teachers agreed that the key was not to focus on the curriculum, but to focus instead on the students.

"The easiest thing to do was to keep thinking about my students and figure out what was in their best interests," Johnson said. "We still wanted to get them ready for what is ahead of them, so my focus was on finding creative ways

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Brother, sister die in murder-suicide

Hannah Davis
News Editor

A brother and sister are dead following a murder-suicide that took place in a home in Forest Lake on Saturday, April 18. According to Forest Lake Police Captain Greg Weiss, at 8:15 p.m., Forest Lake police officers responded to an abandoned 911 call in the 18000 block of Henna Avenue North. When officers entered the home, they found 37-year-old Michelle Kresge dead in the basement bedroom with multiple gunshot wounds. The suspect, 39-year-old Phillip

Kresge, Michelle's brother, fled to another building on the property prior to the officers' arrival. The Washington County SWAT Team entered the building following the sound of a single gunshot and found Phillip dead due to a self-inflicted gunshot wound.

The mother and father were both in the home at the time of the shooting, and were safely escorted out of the building by officers.

Investigators are still trying to determine the owner of the weapon that was used.

Try as they might, banks can't process business loans fast enough

Cliff Buchan
Contributing Writer

Bankers in the greater Forest Lake area were scrambling last week as small businesses flooded their offices with applications for forgivable loans under the Coronavirus Aid Relief and Economic Security Act, also known as the CARES Act. By April 16, however, the \$349 billion authorized by the CARES Act for Small Business Administration allocation had been exhausted.

From Scandia to Forest Lake and on to Wyoming, it was the same story for local community banks that found dozens of hurting small businesses seeking help to stay afloat.

"They are getting slammed," said Greg Isaacson, president and chief executive officer of Security State Bank of Marine as officials in the bank's four locations handled loan applications.

As the federally-backed Paycheck Protection Program funding spigot ran dry, officers of First State Bank of Wyoming said nearly 50 loan applications were still in the works. It was a similar story for Isaacson.

"We took our first loan application on April 6," he said. During the following 10 days, Isaacson said the bank through its offices in Marine on St. Croix, Scandia, Forest Lake and Lindstrom processed "dozens and dozens" of loans for "several" millions of dollars.

It's all happened quickly as part of the federal government's response to the global COVID-19 pandemic that has crippled millions of businesses due to mandated

shut-downs and a general downward turn in consumer spending. More than 22 million Americans have filed for unemployment insurance benefits. In Minnesota, nearly 500,000 have filed for unemployment.

SBA efforts

The \$2.2 trillion CARES Act was passed by Congress in late March and signed into law on March 27. The SBA began releasing funds on April 3. Funds were allocated under PPP to help businesses keep employees on the payroll.

It is one of two SBA programs that were rolled out or expanded to address the economic crisis. The Economic Injury Disaster Loan Program is the second. The CARES Act allocated \$10 billion to EIDL to provide emergency grants of up to \$10,000 for small businesses.

The Paycheck Protection Program has been a critical lifeline to struggling businesses, Zaruba and Isaacson said. Under the PPP, a business can apply quickly and smoothly with reduced red tape for loans to cover payroll, health insurance, rent and utilities. Loans carry a 1% interest rate, but are fully forgivable to cover the initial eight-week period.

Loans are designed for businesses based in the United States with 500 or fewer employees. Loan balances that exceed the eight weeks of payroll and expenses will see repayment delayed for six months.

PPP loans are based on 2019 salary amounts. In calculating a loan,

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