

Reimagining Mental Health During a Global Pandemic

Exploring how initiatives to maintain a healthy and safe community transformed the lives of students and staff, and how they learned and shared their learnings to help overcome obstacles.

By Dina Vourdousis, Carlyle Elementary International World School

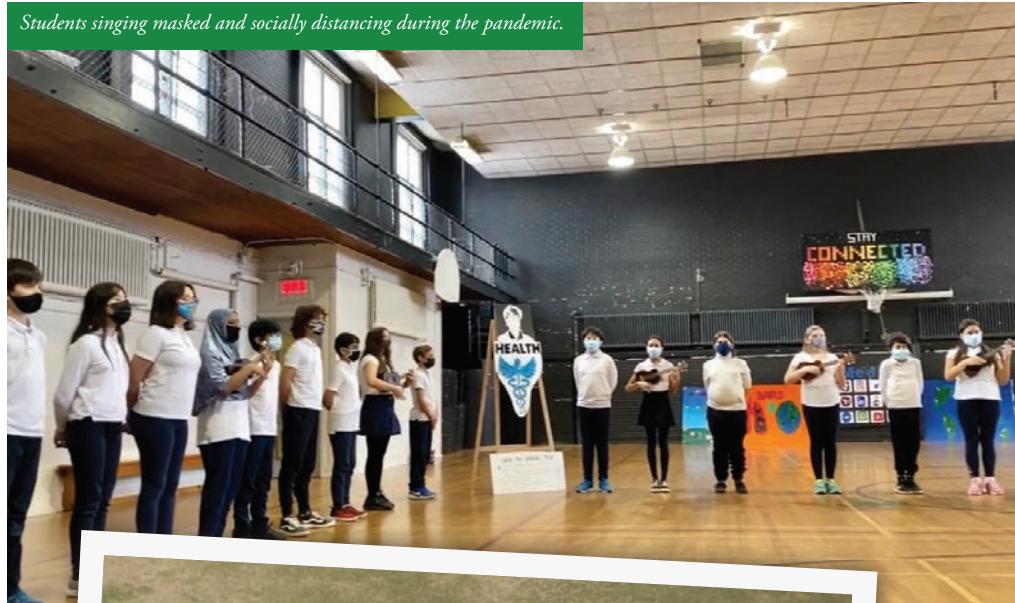
The global COVID-19 pandemic has been a catalyst for learning new educational approaches to thinking clearly and being mindful during a time when the journey has been unclear and confusing. Any journey that threatens the physical and mental health and well-being of humankind can manifest into fear unless creativity grounds the learning community in problem solving initiatives. Upon reflection, at Carlyle Elementary International World School, the International Baccalaureate program is our foundation and Carlyle's International Music program is the glue that keeps us together and makes us stronger.

The pandemic has shown that the Carlyle community comes together in times of crisis to comfort one another. Through honing, owning, and making their creative learning their own, each student shares and makes the Carlyle International Baccalaureate (IB) community a welcoming place to explore learning styles, grow intellectually, and gain experience that strengthens character and camaraderie.

A culture of seasoned creative IB trained professionals, supporting each member's unique talents, while exploring ways to improve their community members' emotional well-being, is a testament to their commitment to excellence. Our IB training proved to be effectively employed to accommodate the unique mental health needs brought on by the pandemic.

Our IB program is the one consistent component in the rapid everchanging and unchartered pandemic world. It is our

Students singing masked and socially distancing during the pandemic.



Carlyle Elementary International World School students captured laying out in the letters "IB."
Photos courtesy of Dina Vourdousis.

foundation and cemented at the core are the IB learners' profile attributes of being open minded, balanced, an inquirer, a communicator, principled, a thinker, a risk taker,

knowledgeable, caring, and reflective are brought out significantly during a crisis, appealing to students' and the team's inner benevolence and kindness.

As a high integration Special Needs IB school, Carlyle students' social and emotional learning are part of student agency. Social emotional wellness is fundamental to the student driven learning. Students have a voice and a choice, and they take action and are accountable for those actions. Being able to engage our community is central to our IB training. Upon shutdown, we immediately used various online programs to continue to connect with one another. Our social counsellor contacted families by phone to check in on parents and children. It was a fragile time and hearing familiar voices and encouraging conversations had impacted students' ability to focus. It also helped parents and guardians have a sense of community when speaking with school members. Our team of childcare educators, teachers and special education technicians kept in touch by phone, mostly to ensure socialization and avoid isolation.

Part of our IB training embeds learning to adapt and be flexible in everchanging and unsettling times. Flexibility enables the Carlyle team to focus our minds and investigate how we would be able to present our next IB Exhibition in 2020/2021. Padlet,

a platform presented at an IB workshop teachers had attended in Ohio in 2019, was employed for our first online IB exhibition in 2020/2021. By this time students were curious and decided on the IB Exhibition topic of "Pandemics across the ages and its effects on the world."

The Carlyle team are masters of initiating new technology to effectively communicate in building successful community liaisons to support students' learning initiatives. The Grade 6 music students composed the song "We Need Each Other" as a reflection of how difficult these times were. We needed each other more than ever, no matter how far we were from each other, music travels through the air across boundaries. Singing with a mask and practicing while social distancing showed the students' resilience through using the power of music. It brought the entire community together in a sense of unison empowering our endurance. Some had mentioned how sad it was going to be for music class this year, especially because live concerts were not allowed. The music students overcame the live performance obstacle by creating this awe-inspiring song and video.

Surprisingly, students grew tired of relying on technology. The Grade 6 students also created a song for the 2022 PYP Exhibition entitled "A Little While," to reflect on how technology affects society and our daily lives. Now more than two years into the pandemic, technological tools have proven to be essential to communicate and navigate today's world. "A Little While" emphasizes the importance of maintaining a balance between screen time and enjoying life without constantly relying on technological devices. This creative process has brought us all together, encouraging us to move, sing, dance, and enjoy every moment in life.

The inspirational virtual concerts that we created school wide over the past two years, has taught us to be mindful of having fun in creating music together. These were all new and wonderful learning experiences for the students in the music class and especially the Carlyle community. In hindsight, the pandemic positively influenced our imagination and instilled in us that mental health is central to maintaining the well-being of a caring community. ○

Dina Vourdousis is the Principal for Carlyle Elementary International World School.

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