



## **Seton Education Partners Responds to the COVID-19 Pandemic Center for Education Reform Webinar, April 2020**

Seton Education Partners co-founder and managing director, Stephanie Saroki de García, was recently invited by the Center for Education Reform to share how Seton has responded to COVID-19. She described the four principles guiding Seton's work and outlined the breathtaking response of our entire team.

### **Remarks by Seton co-founder, Stephanie Saroki de García**

Seton is a national network of character rich, academically excellent, and—for those families who choose it, faith-nurturing—schools. We have three lines of work—all in underserved communities and all at the elementary and middle school levels: (1) a network of [13 Catholic schools](#) we partner with that collectively serve more than 3,000 children; (2) a network of [three charter schools](#) serving nearly 1,000 children in the Bronx; and (3) a new Catholic school that we will fully operate this fall in Ohio called [Romero Academy at Resurrection](#).

### **Four principles guided our response to COVID-19:**

#### **First — Keep it simple.**

The goal right now is to ensure children remain safe and engaged and to keep them from losing ground until schools reopen—*whenever that may be*.

#### **Second — Prioritize the right Cs.**

What do I mean? Compassion, community and culture—*over compliance*—for everyone. While compliance is necessary, it is not sufficient. We cannot lose the human element in all of this.

#### **Third — Don't let the perfect be the enemy of the good.**

Have a thoughtful plan—but stay flexible and be responsive. What leaders, teachers, children and families needed in week 1 was very different from what they needed in weeks 3 & 4. I expect this will hold true going forward.

#### **Fourth — Don't forget Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs.**

This sudden switch to non-traditional schooling for an extended period of time puts students with disabilities AND English Language Learners AND children with only one caregiver at home in a more vulnerable position than ever before. We have meaningfully upped our game on providing robust mental, emotional—and for many of our children, spiritual—health. We asked ourselves: Who are our most vulnerable children and families—and how do we support them? Meals, safe places for children to go, housing security for entire families—we are figuring out how to address the most urgent needs as best we can.

#### **Seton Responds to COVID-19: What Did We Do First?**

- BEFORE the majority of governors even announced school closures, we created an Emergency Task Force of the key leaders we knew would need to weigh in on a fully remote learning strategy. In NYC, this included our ED, Superintendent, CFO, CAO, CTO, head of operations, two of our three principals, and importantly—our chief of character initiatives. For our Catholic schools, our Emergency Task Force was a small and very nimble team—a huge advantage in generating and distributing resources widely across 3,000+ children.
- We sent children home with backpacks full of books and two weeks' worth of learning materials—days before schools were officially shuttered.
- We worked non-stop over a handful of days to develop a thoughtful plan and TIERED resources that we were able to send to leaders and teachers in waves.
- All of our schools are already robust blended learning schools, so we were able to leverage our existing relationships to go from school to home learning FAST.
- We issued computers to families without them (700 in NYC and 1,000 across our Catholic blended learning network).
- We secured internet access for countless families to ensure continued learning at home.



- Finally, we created a [Family Support Fund](#) to provide non-perishable food and supplies (including diapers) to our most vulnerable families, many with bread winners who have lost their jobs already due to this crisis.

**In NYC, we also did the following at our network of Brilla Public Charter Schools:**

- We established and communicated clear expectations for ALL staff—teachers (yes), but also our Fellows, operations team, social workers, counselors, and janitorial staff. We set expectations for what a new schedule would look like—we would need all-hands on deck. For teachers: One expectation we set from the beginning: to call every student twice weekly for 20-30 minutes of deep learning sessions and well-being checks. Any child who doesn't log in during the day gets a call that same day.
- We canceled Spring Break! This may sound extraordinary, but families welcomed this decision. Staff could choose four days of vacation between now and the end of the school year. With a little logistical gymnastics, we could provide all staff a break while also executing on a robust learning plan.
- We created a tech helpline and email led by our ops team to trouble-shoot connectivity and other computer issues. On day 1, 85% of our students were logging in and learning. That percent climbed to 92% by day 2 and continues to climb.
- One thing we did NOT do: We did not lower expectations for children with special needs. Our student services team is providing twice weekly one on one tutorials in addition to home room teacher calls, PLUS, depending on a child's IEP, we're providing weekly counseling sessions for up to one hour.
- Brilla also developed a web page with parent friendly resources like a sample schedule that includes academics, exercise, and chores—it's brilliant—in Spanish and English—and you can find it [here](#).

**Specific to our Catholic blended learning schools:**

- Our team developed and shared suggestions, tips, and ready-to-print resources for school leaders and teachers. This included resources like laptop loan agreements, suggested online learning expectations, log-in credentials, [FREE resources](#) for anyone to



access, and high-quality [printable worksheets](#) for student packets. Schools are hosting daily morning prayer meetings, specials classes and other fun events streamed on social media to build community, and weekly Zoom staff meetings on family communication and instructional quality.

- Our team is continuing to provide support to teachers via weekly Zoom office hours, professional development sessions geared toward digital and live instruction, weekly resource newsletters, and around-the-clock troubleshooting and thought partnering.
- Teachers at our Catholic schools are going above and beyond to ensure that scholars are cared for and learning. They are being creative about ways to reach students and teach from afar, and they are being transparent when they need help—balancing this shift well and producing high-quality learning materials. Families indicate that they are pleased with our schools’ responses and appreciate the support they and their children are getting.
- While nothing can replace in-class instruction, both our Seton and partner school staff are working tirelessly to make sure our scholars are not deprived of meaningful academic, character-building, and faith-nurturing opportunities. Please reach out to [BlendedLearning@SetonPartners.org](mailto:BlendedLearning@SetonPartners.org) for questions on our resources for schools.