

# Yonkers Free Press

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Response managed from virtual “war room” more than 240 laptops distributed, help given to families in need “The school is wonderful,” says single mom of two CSEE students who works in local hospital “Our children are experiencing pretty much a full day of class,” school leader says

## Yonkers Charter School Keeps Learning Going During COVID-19 Shutdown

By CARMEN GOLDBERG AND  
CSEE ADMINISTRATION

YONKERS, NY Parents are giving top marks to educators and administrators at the Charter School of Educational Excellence (CSEE) for ensuring that valuable and rigorous learning continues despite the COVID-19 shutdown. And school leaders are taking the work beyond learning, helping families in need navigate government processes for unemployment benefits and other social service supports.

“I feel like they (CSEE) were right on top of it, getting the lessons together and having the kids start right on the 17th and not have much time without instruction. The school is wonderful. They have made daily check-ins. The teachers are very available. If you have a problem, you contact them and they reply within seconds. They are in touch with the kids on the comments sections,” said Shauna Smalls, a single mom with a daughter, Elisha, in 2nd grade and a son, James, in 5th grade at CSEE.

“Teachers have sent parents daily and weekly calendars to let them know what students should be working on and completing. In addition to this, parents and students are provided ongoing support and virtual tips and strategies to help students succeed. Teachers use a detailed process to monitor work completed and submitted on-line, they take daily attendance, and they call students who aren’t completing or

handing in work to address issues and provide help. I am extremely proud of our students, their dedication and commitment to their education. We currently have on average 94% daily attendance. This speaks volumes,” CSEE Superintendent Cindy Lopez said.

“Teachers are on all day,” Ms. Smalls said. “They put in their lesson plans, even the night before. The kids are getting on between 8:30 and 9:30 and they’re getting started.” A Yonkers resident, Ms. Smalls works full-time as a mammography technologist in the radiology department of St. Joseph’s Medical Center in Yonkers, where she’s part of the front-line battle against COVID-19.

Like all schools, CSEE has had to adapt its program to protect students and staff, and their families, from the potentially deadly effects of COVID-19. But due to advance planning, a “war room” mentality, and an academic program that already empha-

sizes high use of technology, the transition to distance learning was less difficult for CSEE teachers, students and parents, school leaders said.

"Since we are a high-tech school and have been providing ongoing professional development in this area for a long time, teachers are familiar and have been using on-line platforms as part of their daily routine," CSEE Superintendent Lopez said.

"Our students have been completing work online for the last 8-9 years as part of their daily schedule. They've been working online consistently so they're very fluent at distance learning."

Parent and PTO President Lisbel Rosario said her 7th grade son, Alexis Toledo, is in regular contact with his teachers and noted his English Language Arts teacher, created a YouTube channel for live reading and real-time question-and-answer time with students.

"Teachers are doing a fantastic job keeping communication. They're maintaining great communication with the kids throughout the day, keeping them on track, letting them know who hasn't turned in assignments, telling them when the deadlines are," Ms. Rosario said.

So-called "special" classes are also continuing. For example, physical education classes are being held virtually through a program with the nation's top orthopedics and sports medicine hospital, the Hospital for Special Surgery in Manhattan.

"The school and the hospital gave us Phys Ed lesson plans for home use," Ms. Smalls said, adding that 5th grader James also continues to receive instruction in Spanish, music and art.

"They learn technique, how to do exercises, the right way to do them, and then a quiz on how they did, how they feel, the names of the muscles. It's teaching them as they're actually exercising."

The school's unique Physical Education program was developed with the Hospital for Special Surgery's Sports Safety Program a relationship that started when hospital officials attended a coaching clinic held at CSEE three years ago by the New York Knicks, CSEE Athletic Director Michael De Simone said.

Since then, HSS has worked with CSEE coaches and teachers on injury prevention, proper stretching techniques and other state-of-the-art methods to keep students healthy.

Virtually, each CSEE student logs on daily for a 20-minute PE class. Attendance and completion are monitored through the log-in process. This ensures students are held accountable for completing each lesson. "We're probably one of the only schools in the state hitting the state-mandated Phys Ed requirement each week," DeSimone said. "And all the student needs is WiFi and a phone or computer."

When it was clear the virus would cause major disruption in the regular school day, CSEE leaders created a "war room" in the Warburton Avenue school building to anticipate and address problems and issues. They now continue that regular work virtually.

Parents with needs know to reach out to the school. As of late March, CSEE has setup internet for various families and distributed 240 laptops to families who need them, with a goal of ensuring all students have online access. As of now, 100 percent of CSEE students have access to technology.

"We are meeting weekly with our elementary and middle school principals, our superintendent, parent coordinators and operations people," said CSEE Trustee and co-founder Sobeida Cruz. "We're sharing information, and down the chain every single person in our school is working."

Ms. Cruz added; "We want to make sure that our children are learn-

ing at the age that they're at, including our special needs children and English language learners."

Along with assuring learning, CSEE also is helping families' access public benefits for people who have lost their jobs or need assistance during the COVID-19 crisis. One CSEE dad lost his bus driving job as his wife went into labor.

"He was so desperate he didn't know what to do with the child at home and his wife in the hospital. We helped find someone to stay with his child so he could go to the hospital, we helped get them formula and then navigated with the State Labor Department to get him benefits," said Carmen Goldberg, CSEE's parent relations director.

"It's been very overwhelming for parents."

CSEE educates approximately 850 students in grades K-9 and will grow to K-12 in the next three years. Upon completion of the high school campus, CSEE will be serving approximately 1,150 students. Parent demand is very high, with some 500 students on CSEE's waiting list. Like all charter public schools, CSEE is tuition free.

CSEE is one of the highest-performing charter public schools in New York State, outperforming the Westchester County and statewide averages in every academic category.

Last year, 97% of CSEE 8th graders scored proficient on the ELA assessment and 100% of 8th grade students took the high school level math and science exams. More than 92% passed the Algebra I Regents and 90% passed the Living Environment Regents, earning credits towards high school graduation.

In addition, CSEE has been designated as a Reward School for the last five years by the New York State Education Department for making extraordinary progress in closing the achievement gap.