



Unlocking the upside of distance learning: respite for teens with social anxiety.

Carmel High School's health teacher helps her students navigate the murky waters of distance learning with compassion and understanding.

By Sarah Fox

For years, Carmel High School health teacher, Leigh Cambra, had been slowly trying to pull together a “handbook” for her students to promote optimal mental health in teens. When she came across the WE Well-being Playbook last March, she thought, “this is exactly what I’ve been wanting to create! It’s been created for me!”

Now, her Carmel High School freshmen start the day twice a week by signing into an online portal and reading from an assigned area of the playbook. They then meet with their Cambra and their peers to discuss the topic, and they are left with an activity to complete.

Knowing the challenges distance learning presents for students, how they use the playbook—and even if they complete the day’s activity—is up to them.

Although the playbook – a part of the WE Well-Being program that empowers youth and educators with tools and resources to promote their own well-being and that of their community – wasn’t created for distance learning, you’d think it was, she says.

Leigh is particularly excited for the next chapter in the playbook, focused on gratitude, compassion and empathy. “This chapter kind of screams where we all are right now,” she says. She hopes it will ignite more conversation in class, as well as interest and participation in the schoolwide service club, This Club Saves Lives. When the school shutdown, she was unsure how or if the club would continue, but kids were eager to keep going.

“They’re not required to do community service right now—they’re wanting to,” she says.

Since the beginning of the school year, This Club Saves Lives has served meals to families evacuated by California’s wildfires. They started a reading club between the high school students and elementary school students over Zoom. For Halloween, they hand-delivered signs to community members supporting an

initiative to donate to the food bank instead of handing out candy. The initiative raised \$3,000.

Their hard work in the community doesn’t go unnoticed. “We’ve created a reputation in our community of being that group that’s always there to help,” Leigh says. She prides her club on being proactive. “Anytime somebody needs something, we don’t wait for somebody to tell us what to do – we jump and we do it.”

Amongst the lectures, assignments and tests, Leigh teaches stress-management techniques and ways to cope with anxiety and depression. She asks students how they plan to connect with people in the community. She shows students the importance of connecting with themselves.

With the playbook, students now have “a place where they can go to every day to write down their thoughts and to be introduced to a new way of being connected to something.” It also gives students in distance learning a sacred slice of normalcy during the unpredictability of a pandemic: a routine.

“Knowing how many students I come across that have anxiety, I think this is important we treat all of our students as people and not just as academic students who are trying to get into college,” she says. In Leigh’s class, sharing is optional, and journaling goes ungraded. Exploring well-being is an intimate and personal journey. Leigh’s noticed that some kids are doing better in this style of distance learning; the long, lecture style classes and pressure of presenting themselves in person five days a week doesn’t work for everyone.

“Some of the students who have been really honest about their social anxiety have actually done better with distance learning,” she says. “I hope when everything goes back to normal, we learn a lot from this, and we create more flexibility in education.”

