

After Tough Year, TSA's Newman Ushers in Changes

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The Sharon Academy's head of school, Mary Newman, applauds during the school's 2021 commencement exercises in June. (Herald File / Tim Calabro)

With a new schedule for the school day, and masks for everyone, Mary Newman's second year as head of school for The Sharon Academy kicked off last week, with three days of student orientation. Students' first day of classes followed this Tuesday.

That re-vamped schedule is part of an effort to further the independent school's dive into "deeper learning," a conglomeration of strategies developed by educators throughout the country, all aimed at minimizing "cognitive interference," explained Newman. Cognitive interference, she added, refers to things such as keeping track of schedules that change daily, or other things that distract from class subject matter. The new schedule is one way for TSA to reduce cognitive interference, Newman explained.

To that end, all core classes will take place in 90-minute time slots throughout the year. Rather than juggling many academic subjects at once, students will focus on just two at a time each month along with their elective courses. A student might have an English and a science class each day and then, when the month is over, shift to social studies and math, for example.

TSA has also shifted the start time of class to allow students to either sleep in or otherwise have more time during which they're not required to focus on academics. The move aims to help students better focus on their classes by adapting the schedule to normal teenage circadian rhythms. For students who have more energy in the morning, that hour-and-a-half could be used for things like getting homework done, said Newman.

After a year of dealing with the pandemic, Newman said asking teachers last spring to change the way they teach subjects adds a significant workload.

"So many of us so much of the time just wanted things to get easier," she acknowledged, But despite the challenge of re-designing the curriculum while at the same time mitigating the pandemic's ongoing effects on school, Newman said the changes came at a critical moment.

"The pandemic fundamentally changed so much about what we do at school that to go back to what we were doing before the pandemic was to completely disregard this opportunity ... which is to really change what we're doing for the better."

While restructuring the schedule is a big shift for this year, Newman said if the changes seem successful, she aims to continue enhancing deeper learning at the school.

Newman is no stranger to TSA—serving first as a Spanish teacher, and later as an administrator before taking on the lead role last year, she said this push is a natural one for the school.

"My hope is that this commitment to deeper learning is really the next long-term chapter for TSA, and that we take what we already know and we do this deep thinking and redesign work that we're doing now and that we can kind of be a model for how a school that's completely committed to deeper learning looks."

That's important, she said, because TSA is well-poised to make the changes, as a small, independent school. But she hopes more schools will be able to tap into the deeper learning models of educating students.

"What it comes down to is preparing kids for this incredibly, rapidly changing world," something that's critical for every school to do, she posited.

Pandemic, Interim

Among those changes, is, of course, the COVID-19 pandemic that began a year and a half ago, Newman said. Last year, students began the year divided into cohorts, and each student was only in school two days a week. It wasn't until late April that, thanks to vaccinations and weather that allowed comfortably meeting outside, all students could be back in school five days a week.

This year, all students will begin the year masked, but in school five days a week said Newman, noting that, with the middle and high schools combined, TSA has roughly 145 students enrolled this year.

Having students back fulltime from the start of the year is key to building relationships within the school, said Newman. She is hopeful that by maintaining a mask mandate, encouraging vaccinations, and requiring anyone with symptoms of illness to stay home, all students will be able to remain in school throughout the year.

Newman is also hopeful that TSA will be able to bring back its regular high school “interim”—a full-school musical typically staged in November at Chandler Center for the Arts. Last year, due to the pandemic, the musical was staged at the end of the year, outdoors. Although still an important experience for the students, Newman said, she feels strongly that if it’s at all possible, staging it at the usual time at Chandler, will happen this year.

Supportive Community

Besides the pandemic’s effects, a year ago this week, Newman’s husband, Ross Gortner, was in a catastrophic bike accident, from which he’s still recovering, said Newman.

“Last year was hard,” she said. “In so many ways it felt like a shadow of what it was supposed to be.”

Currently Gortner is in a rehabilitation facility in Massachusetts, where he’s spent the past two months. In October, he’ll return home.

Newman has had to contend with the emotional and logistical toll of having her husband out of commission, while learning to head up the school, she explained. But as his health improves, Newman said she’s excited for him to come home, especially to be more actively involved in the lives of their children (ages 8 and 11) again.

“My two young kids went through all of last year with the pandemic and with having a dad whose health was kind of touch-and-go,” said Newman.

As Gortner continues to get better, “the thing we’re most looking forward to is having him home to watch Thomas play soccer and watch Elizabeth ride horses and just having him back in the scene,” she said.

Newman said she’s been grateful for the outpouring of support she’s received from both the school and her neighbors in Strafford.

“In spite of all of the incredible challenges ... I’m still so glad I’m in this job ... and that’s a testament to the community,” she said. “It’s a big job, and the circumstances are hard, but I really love it—I really love these people and these students.”