



Distance Learning Academy News

September 8, 2020

Dear Distance Learning Academy Families,

I am very excited to welcome you and your students to DLA - a fully virtual learning model designed to provide students with social-emotional connections to peers and educators while engaging in grade level curriculum online. To accomplish this, an experienced and enthusiastic group of Newton Public Schools educators have come together to teach the students in DLA. They are currently working on plans for the start of the year and ways to welcome students and families to this new learning model.

I am writing to share information about the **structure of DLA** and to hopefully answer the many questions that you have about your student's year.

Distance Learning Academy Staffing

In addition to a Principal and an Assistant Director of Special Education, there are many NPS educators assigned to DLA this year including [general educators](#), psychologists, social workers, ELL teachers, specialists (Physical Education, Music, Art, Library), instructional coaches, Informational Technology Specialists, METCO counselors, assistants and aides. It takes a large group of diverse and dedicated professionals to support the students enrolled in DLA which consists of 1,243 students assigned to 59 classrooms from kindergarten through fifth grade. While this sounds like a daunting number of students and educators to coordinate, I am energized by the challenge and confident that with the continued support from the district and collaboration with the other elementary schools that your students will have a successful year both socially and academically.

Weekly Schedule

We are in the midst of creating grade level specific schedules. This is a complex process across all schools whether hybrid or DLA.

Cohort and Class Assignments

At 9:00 a.m. tomorrow, you will be able to log in to Aspen to see your child's cohort and teacher assignment for this year. As noted in district communications, **changes in a student program or cohort are not possible at this time.** Teacher assignments are also final. As you know, class list development is a multi-step process that involves a variety of staff members as we consider a wide number of factors and needs. If you provided feedback about your child's placement, please know that your comments and input were reviewed and considered by the teams as we engaged in the placement process. This year was even more complicated than usual as we navigated the complexity of cohort assignments and programmatic needs with two different schooling models. It feels important to acknowledge that sometimes children may be disappointed, for example, when they are assigned to a classroom separate from a good friend or do not receive the teacher they had hoped for. In such circumstances, we recommend that you acknowledge the disappointment, yet convey your confidence in your child's ability to have a great year just the same. Your positive attitude and enthusiasm for the year ahead sends important cues to your child and we appreciate your assistance in helping every one of our students to have the best start to the year.

Making Connections as a Community

Some of you who have chosen the DLA model have expressed concern that your child may become disconnected from their home school community. I want to assure you that the PTOs, principals and faculty at all elementary schools have been thinking about ways to maintain a sense of community among all students, regardless of learning model. These plans are in the early planning stages. We will update you as they become more concrete. If you have ideas, feel free to contact your home-school PTO leadership.

Within DLA, we are also eager to build community and have formed a working group to plan activities for students to develop connections with their classmates and to feel a part of the DLA school community.

Technology

The district has made a commitment to a 1:1 model, which means that all elementary students will receive a device; iPads for students in grades K-2 and Chromebooks for students in grades 3-5. That said, devices are in high demand given the number of schools across the country engaged in distance learning. Device delivery will be delayed until just after the start of the school year. To ensure all students have access to a device, the district will use our current supply of devices for families who have no

alternative option prior to the start of school. You should have received a survey from the district this week asking you if your child needs a device prior to the start of school. Please check your SPAM folder if you did not receive the survey. The Office of Information Technology will follow up with distribution plans. For additional information please visit the [NPS technology support webpage](#).

❖ Technology Platforms:

As a district, we learned a lot from our experiences in the spring as well as from the feedback we received from families. The district has invested in many engaging, user-friendly digital resources that complement the NPS curriculum. All students, both in hybrid and the DLA model, will be using these technologies.

- **Grades K-3 will use Seesaw** as their digital classroom home. Seesaw is a platform that allows students to show their learning using photos, videos, drawings, text, PDFs, etc. Teachers can post curriculum resources, assign and collect student work, provide feedback, and share student work with families. This takes the place of the slide decks which we sent out weekly in the Spring, and we expect that Seesaw will be much more accessible for children, teachers and families alike.
- **Grades 4 and 5 will use Google Classroom** as their digital classroom home. Google Classroom allows teachers to create classes, distribute assignments, grade and send feedback, and see everything in one place. Many fourth and fifth graders are already familiar with Google Classroom from the spring.
- Additionally, we will use a variety of grade-specific digital curricular resources throughout the year.

Home-School Communication

The district is in the process of creating a website for the Distance Learning Academy similar to those for neighborhood home schools. Until that is ready, I will continue to share information with you through email. On Monday, September 14, we will hold a webinar for families to review the details of the DLA structure and to answer your questions. You will receive login information shortly. In addition, your student's teacher will reach out by Friday, September 11 to introduce themselves and provide more specific class information. If you have any pressing questions that need to be answered in advance of the webinar, you can reach out to me or my DLA colleagues (contact information below).

Supplies

Essential supplies for student learning will be provided by the school as in years past.

If teachers have specific needs or requests for student learning from home (which are minimal), they will be in touch directly with families.

One thing to think about with your student as you prepare for virtual learning is setting up a designated work space. This can help students transition from home to “school” and prepare to learn. The attached [article](#) has some suggestions including organizing a few essential items for easy access and use.

Dates to Note:

- ❖ **Wednesday September 9** - Families will be able to view A/B cohort and classroom assignments. Notification including directions on how to log into your child’s Aspen account will be sent from the district.

- ❖ **Week of September 14** - Principal led family information webinars; schedule and links to follow.

- ❖ **Wednesday, September 16 - Friday, September 19** - *Orientation for DLA* students including “meet your teacher” on Zoom, learn about online learning platforms and engage in a Back-to-School activity.

- ❖ **Monday, September 21** - DLA begins for all students K-5
 - Monday, Tuesday, Thursday and Friday 8:30am-3:00pm; Wednesdays 8:30am-12:30pm.

I realize there are many more details and questions that could not all be addressed through this communication. To help with this, we are working to create an FAQ for families participating in DLA. This document will be shared soon.

Please be assured that the DLA faculty is working incredibly hard to prepare for a successful year with your students. One of the best ways to ensure student success is for schools and families to partner together on this new journey. To that end, I look forward to working with you to support the learning and growth of all students enrolled in DLA.

Warm regards,

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