

# Adapting in the Age of Covid-19

## One School's Journey from Surviving to Thriving

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### Abstract

This is the first in a series of holistic educator narratives that explore the practice of holistic education. Michael Carberry is the Founder & Director of the Whole Life Learning Center in Austin, Texas.

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"Did you all know that I can jump higher than a mountain?" I asked with a grin, looking out at the big crowd of parents, kids, and teachers in the audience.

"No, seriously. Do you know why?"

Right on cue, my five-year-old son shouted from the crowd, "Because mountains can't jump!" A mixture of chuckles and moans ensued, as I turned to introduce the next act to the stage.

It was Friday, March 12, 2020, the last day before Spring Break - the day of our annual Spring Showcase at the [Whole Life Learning Center](#). It's an opportunity for kids of all ages at WLLC to submit a piece of visual art for the Showcase gallery, or get up on stage to offer the community a performance. Our geodesic dome was set up for the gallery, complete with sculptures, paintings, drawings, and multi-media art displayed for our community to appreciate. And that afternoon on the outdoor stage, we enjoyed performances from two seven-year-old hip-hop dancers, a middle school dance troop, a talented young piano player who played a piece by Dave Brubek, and a sixth grader who gave a spirited performance of a show tune from Matilda. Our Spring Showcase finished with a heart-warming sing-along of our school's unofficial theme song, [Precious Human Life](#).

Little did we know, that due to the impending pandemic and our collective duty to protect precious human life, we wouldn't be returning to campus after heading off for Spring Break that afternoon.

By the next day, Austin, and most of the country was locking down in response to the spread of the coronavirus and you pretty much know how the story went from there.

At the Whole Life Learning Center, we shifted to distance learning for the remainder of the Spring Semester. Pivoting over the course of a week, we began utilizing Zoom, Google Classroom, and SeeSaw digital portfolios to stay connected and facilitate learning. We finished the year with video messages from our team to all the families and a graduation parade complete with yard signs, personalized mementos, diplomas, and Pomp and Circumstance blasting from a loudspeaker in my truck to honor all of our 8th grade graduates. It was a challenging ten weeks for the whole community, but we pulled together to get through it.

On the business side, with a significant loss of incoming tuition, we had to let go of all part-time and even some full-time staff. Thankfully, through the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP), we were able to hire many of them back on. That, and a loan from the Small Business Administration (SBA) made it possible for WLLC to make it through the summer.

Obviously, we were not alone in that struggle. Small businesses everywhere took a hit and many were unable to recover from it. Unemployment skyrocketed, while at the same time individuals and families struggled to stay out of poverty and keep food on the table. On top of all of that, children have had to cope with the limitations and challenges of remote learning. [According to the CDC](#), nearly

1(1), May 2021

one half of all students have been receiving online-only instruction since March 2020. This presents hardships for families and disproportionately affects families of lower socioeconomic status. [Recent surveys](#) from the U.S. Education Department also found large differences in who was learning remotely based on race with 68% of Asian, 58% of Black, and 56% of Hispanic fourth graders learning entirely remotely compared to just 27% of White students.

Dr. Lee Beers of the [American Academy for Pediatrics](#) states that, “Children absolutely need to return to in-school learning for their healthy development and well-being, and so safety in schools and in the community must be a priority.”

But like many independent schools last summer, we were paddling in a sea of uncertainty. We weren’t sure we would be able to open in the fall, or even stay in business if we needed to continue with a remote learning or hybrid model. My wife Caroline and I played out entire scenarios about what we would do if we couldn’t re-open the school. We even seriously considered the idea of transforming the space into a small-scale plant nursery.

In a quote often attributed to Charles Darwin, Leon C. Megginson encapsulates a main idea presented in Darwin’s book *Origin of Species*:

*“It is not the most intellectual of the species that survives; it is not the strongest that survives; but the species that survives is the one that is able best to adapt and adjust to the changing environment in which it finds itself.”*

He goes on to say that, “the civilization that is able to survive is the one that is able to adapt to the changing physical, social, political, moral, and spiritual environment in which it finds itself.”

Although there was considerable uncertainty about schools reopening throughout the summer of 2020, in the end, less than 1 percent of private schools have closed due to COVID-19, [according to the Cato Institute](#), a libertarian think-tank that has been tracking school closures. It’s worth noting that there may be many more smaller, independent schools that haven’t reported closings.

For those schools that have persisted, it was *adaptability* that helped make it possible through this tumultuous time. In the end, we were able to reopen our school and Caroline was so inspired about the plant nursery idea that she went ahead and launched [Cultivate Holistic Homestead Supply](#) on our campus! I want to share here about the adaptations that helped us at the Whole Life Learning Center to survive and even thrive throughout this pandemic.

Before getting into that though, it’s important to acknowledge the immense privilege inherent in the private school model. With tuition being naturally prohibitive to many, there is an exclusivity that cannot be denied. We are always working to increase accessibility and diversity at WLLC and ultimately our goal is to share the insights and innovations of our holistic education model in a much broader way with anyone who wants to learn more.

The issues of inequity in education are systemic on a grand scale and it can be hard to identify where to begin in the work of transforming education. Buckminster Fuller said, “You never change things by fighting the existing reality. To change something, build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete.” Similarly, Daniel Quinn wrote, “Trying to change an institution by implementing programs is like putting sticks in a river and expecting it to change course. If you want to make a significant change, you need to start carving a new path and soon a new river will branch off.” That is the approach we’ve taken with the Whole Life Learning Center. It is a river all on its own, joining forces with the growing tide of holistic education options bubbling up around the world. Together, we must continue to promote the values of diversity and inclusion as we work toward greater systemic change.

But just one year ago, rather than being able to focus on that bigger picture, our conversations were all about survival. When we initially shifted to remote learning last March, we lost a lot of families because either they couldn’t afford to, or didn’t want to pay tuition for a distance learning program. We had zero answers as to when we would be able to open our doors for in-person learning, and no precedent as to how to do that safely during a global pandemic. As we pondered enrollments and employee contracts for the following year, the uncertainty was paralyzing, the responsibility was overwhelming, and the stress had us almost ready to throw the towel in.

For a brief time, we seriously considered a decentralized model where we would form pods and our Whole Life Learning Mentors would work with mixed-age groups at various sites around town. We loved the idea of being able to share what we were up to at the Whole Life Learning Center with a growing population of families that didn’t feel safe sending their children back to school, but wanted supportive guidance and a consistent structure for their child to learn with a small group of peers. This idea also meant that we could serve families that might not otherwise be able to attend WLLC.

However, we proceeded, we knew that safety needed to be the first priority. That summer, as we read and listened to all the reporting on the risks of reopening schools, we realized that by default, the term “schools” as it was being used was

1(1), May 2021

referring to these massive institutions with thousands of students enrolled and hundreds of faculty and staff that would be moving through shared indoor spaces every day. We made the important distinction that we were indeed a different beast altogether, with less than 100 students and staff on site at any time. And being a small, independent school, without bureaucratic red tape hindering our administrative decisions, we naturally had the ability to be more agile in our responsiveness to the changing circumstances of the pandemic.

Ultimately, we realized that if we could minimize the mixing and mingling of groups at WLLC, then the pod idea could essentially be applied to our classes on campus. With that insight and the advantage of having a more nimble and adaptable model, we made the decision to open our doors in the fall with the intention of facilitating in-person learning as long as it was safe to do so.

Once we had clarity on our end, we set out to survey our community to see where they were with their needs, work, finances, and the risk levels with which they were comfortable.

We found that families with a lower risk tolerance generally had someone with an underlying health condition and had already decided to homeschool and opt out of any kind of in-person group learning.

After that, the primary concern from families was that in-person learning may not be consistently reliable, and that shifts to distance learning would be difficult to manage at home, and wouldn't set their kids up for optimal learning and social-emotional development.

The feedback was clear - if families were going to enroll, they wanted to count on their child being able to attend in-person as much as possible so that they (the parents) would be able to work and their child could have a consistent, enriching, social learning experience.

After assessing the community needs, we used guidance from the [CDC](#), the [American Academy of Pediatrics](#) and our local health authority to create an updated model for the year that also fit with our community culture.

We started by cutting class sizes by  $\frac{1}{3}$ , bringing max enrollment from 18 learners per class down to 12, bringing our total enrollment from 90 to 60 learners enrolled. From there, we knew we needed to create more group insulation (think pods) and minimize overlap. That meant cutting many of our part-time, rotating specialty teacher positions and finding other ways to bring that enrichment in.

We decided to keep art as our primary specialty class because art is such an accessible and versatile way to

process all of the social and emotional upheaval we've experienced over this past year. Beyond that, WLLC Mentors took on gardening projects with their classes, the middle-schoolers self-organized additional classes including theater and dance, and I snuck away from my administrative duties each week to do music and movement with the preschoolers. In addition, we had already (pre-pandemic) embraced project-based learning across all grade-levels as a way to promote engagement while cultivating the 21st century skills of collaboration, critical thinking, project management, and presentation skills.

Creating learning spaces was the next endeavor. We knew that we wanted to be outside as much as possible and thankfully, the climate in central Texas generally allows for that throughout the school year. Our campus is not huge compared to many schools, but situated on 1.6 acres, we have been able to create distinct outdoor learning spaces for all five of our mixed-age classes to rotate through throughout the day. Each class still has their indoor homeroom as a home base to work from for brief periods during the day, or during inclement weather. I would say that pre-pandemic we were outside roughly 40% of the day at WLLC, and now it's more like 90%.

As you know by now, other than avoiding large indoor gatherings, the most effective ways to deter the spread of this virus is masking and distancing. At WLLC we have staff and kids ages 5 and up masking indoors, and outdoors whenever we can't socially distance, or do a "wing check".

Each morning parents receive a text reminder with a link to fill out their [symptom check survey](#). Then once they're cleared for school we do temperature checks at drop off. And of course there are plenty of reminders for hand washing and sanitizing throughout the day.

With these measures in place we made it through the first semester without a single COVID-19 case in the community. However, we figured it wasn't really a matter of *if*, but *when* we would have cases sprout up. In February, we had two cases in our parent community (in the same household), along with two cases among our staff (including one who was asymptomatic). We have had no known cases among students so these did not seem to be in-school transmissions.

Thanks to transparency and quick communication, we were able to shift the affected class to remote learning for a week, while we did a deep cleaning at the school and families in that class isolated, observed for symptoms, and got tested. No other positive cases came up and that class was able to return to campus the next week.

1(1), May 2021

Through these first cases in our community we were able to learn a lot and make important tweaks to our policies and protocols. Most importantly, we were able to verify that our targeted closure helped mitigate further spread and we didn't need to shift the entire school to remote learning.

WLLC is not necessarily unique in these outcomes. Evidence suggests that with proper mitigation strategies, K–12 schools can conduct in-person learning with minimal in-school transmission of SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19. [The same study conducted by the CDC](#), which used 18 Wisconsin schools as its sample, posits that transmission of SARS-CoV-2 in K–12 schools may not significantly contribute to COVID-19 spread nationwide. This is great news as we strive to provide more in-person learning opportunities for families who need those options.

We have learned a lot about what it means to be resilient during these times, and that doesn't simply apply to operating during a pandemic. At the time of writing, much of Texas is still in recovery after devastating winter weather knocked out power and water for people across the state. Resilience means adaptability. To adapt we need to be open to constantly learning while reflecting on the process. Just as we endeavor to cultivate a growth mindset within our learners, we need to continually embrace that for ourselves as educators and community leaders. And as holistic educators we must acknowledge the broader contexts that we are moving through as a society.

For example, with support from [PEAS \(Partners for Education, Agriculture, and Sustainability\)](#) we have integrated eco-therapy activities into our classes at WLLC to process all of the challenges and changes in our lives over the past year. When our winter storm thawed out, we got right to work learning more about water, the power grid, sources of energy, and ways to design for resilience with additional resources from our [EcoRise curriculum](#).

As the conscience of our nation has grappled with issues of social justice and systemic racism we have brought those topics to the forefront of our conversations with weekly themes including diversity, equity, and inclusion guiding our activities and discussions at developmentally appropriate levels. We also lean heavily on content and resources from [Learning for Justice](#) (formerly Teaching Tolerance) to weave these crucial issues into our everyday work across the curriculum.

There has been a lot written about how students are "falling behind" during this pandemic. And while that is a partial truth according to state standards and metrics, we can also see this disruption as an opportunity to address these societal challenges head on while cultivating more resilient, conscientious leaders for the world we are living in.

Although we may hold onto hopes of things "going back to normal," really, there is no going back, only forward. Perhaps in the future, this time will be seen as a disruptive moment that opened the gates for new innovations and educational models to flourish such as the microschool concept exemplified by programs like [Prenda](#) and [Prisma](#). Maybe more families will begin to feel that corporate-scale school districts are not truly suited to serve their growing children, and will demand more human-scale alternatives where they can thrive.

As we learn forward at WLLC we will continue to adapt our model to respond to the needs of our community while living and teaching our values of social and environmental justice, personal empowerment, and lifelong learning.

In the book *Self-Organizing Revolution*, Ron Miller writes that "Holistic education calls for a more open, authentic relationship between the individual learner and the fluid, complex, living world we inhabit." These days our world is feeling more complex than ever and that is our invitation to deepen in our practice, to embrace challenges as opportunities, and remember that we are playing an integral role in transforming our world for the better.

### Acknowledgements

*Michael Carberry is the Founder & Director of the Whole Life Learning Center in Austin, Texas. As an educational visionary and innovator he has developed a holistic pedagogy (Whole Life Learning) focused on environmental sustainability, social justice, personal growth, and empowerment. When he's not at the Whole Life Learning Center, Michael can be found spending quality time with his family, wrestling with his two young sons, playing music, taking care of the animals, or turning the compost. Michael has earned an MA from the SelfDesign Graduate Institute with a focus on Post-Modern Schools and Integral Learning, along with an MS in Library and Information Sciences and a BA in Philosophy from the University of Illinois.*

*Useful article to add current stats about families and their educational choices:*

<https://www.npr.org/2021/03/05/973373489/npr-ipsos-poll-nearly-one-third-of-parents-may-stick-with-remote-learning>