

## **On Dorms and School Closure and the Switch to Online Learning**

*T. Shuman, Regional Director, ACSI Global*

What is a traditional, dormitory style, boarding program to do when the school is suddenly forced to switch from classroom-based learning to home-based learning?

Switching from classroom to home-based learning, while complicated in the typical day-school, is doable with a supportive parent and family structure. But what happens in a dormitory setting when suddenly you have dorm staff tasked to provide not only nurturing support but also the primary learning support mechanism and structure to 10-30 students living under one roof?

We recognize that there are unique aspects to every boarding program around the world. Some have central dining, and some have family style meals. Some dorms are centralized within a walled compound and some dorms are decentralized and nestled within local neighborhoods. Some of you have dedicated Dorm Parents leading each boarding home and some have dorm staff taking shifts to provide supervision and caregiving in the dorm. And in some dorms, dorm staff also teach their own load of classes that they will also have to teach online. Each situation is different. This document does not pretend to cover every circumstance but should serve as a way for you and your caregiving team to think through issues and apply them to your situation.

### **Send Kids Home If You Can**

Programs should first consider the option of safely sending boarding students home to be with their parents or designated official guardian, approved in advance. There may also be the option of homestay in the community for boarding students. If you consider placing your dorm kids into local homes, ALL safety checks and safeguards for the host home must be adhered to and implemented prior to placing any child into that home. Your safeguards cannot be skipped. \*See appendix for Homestay best practices. \*\*See appendix for room and board refund considerations.

After sending students home or placing them into homestay, there will undoubtedly be a number of students who cannot leave for a variety of reasons. International students or students from non-supportive home situations may especially have difficulty at this time. It is imperative that the school and boarding program leadership think through their response to the potential long-term hosting of students in the dorm without the usual support of normal school life.

### **Staffing, Supervision, and Caregiving Issues in the Dorm**

- **Hours.** The move to home-based learning will place extra requirements on the staff who work in dorms. Think through the original contract with your dorm parents/dorm staff. Now think carefully through what options you have for extending the hours needed to provide supervision and caregiving. Imagine an unending weekend with responsibility for creating a learning environment on top of that!
- **Time off.** Think about the health of your dorm staff. Having the students in and around the dorms 24/7 means your dorm staff absolutely need time for rejuvenation, rest, and alone time in order to serve their boarders well. Can you support days and weekends off through a system of relief?
- **Relief.** Think through how to support the dorm staff with other staff who can come in so dorm personnel can get a break. These persons must only be trusted members of your community. Obviously, you will need a way to health-screen those individuals who come in and out of the dorms. The relief team should not be a large rotation of people coming in to give breaks. Make it one person, or maybe two,

who are assigned to the same dorm for every break and those people must be committed to social distancing when outside the dorm. • Managing Homebased Learning. What is the expectation for the dorm staff alongside the students in the dorm? Are they expected to help, to supervise a study hall-like environment, to proctor exams?

- What about the dorm parent who also teaches a class of their own? They will need time to prepare new types of lessons and time to teach those courses. How do you keep the dorm home a place of love and care and fun while also doing school?
- Support the dorm staff. You are already providing training for your teachers; do not neglect training your dorm staff in what the teachers are doing. Who do they go to when they have questions? What about supporting the student with learning differences? What about the student in the dorm who has attention difficulties—how best will they study? What about the ELL student? Your dorm staff will need tips on these scenarios.
- Accountability. It should not surprise us that tensions can rise in the extreme close environment of the dormitory between students, between staff, and between staff and students. Having everyone together longer than ever before means the environment must be monitored by leadership for healthy and wholesome interactions. Boarding supervisors must be in touch daily with dorm staff AND students and be ready to intervene as necessary. Do you have a way for students to reach you if a problem arises? Have you reviewed your child safety policies with this new setup in mind?
- Accountability part 2. Given the above, it is imperative that the supervisor of the boarding staff be available and prepared to visit and talk with the dorm staff on a continual basis. If you can't visit the dorms, do a zoom call often. They will need help and counsel on a number of issues.

## Doing Your Part to Stop the Spread

- Day schools are moving to home-based learning to support the new social distancing orders. What if you can't do that? What does social distancing look like in the dorms?
- It is my opinion that we need to look at boarding programs as large families. Families everywhere, small and large, will be isolated to their homes, but those same families will not order their children to stay separated from one another. It will be the same with boarding homes.
- During this time, there will be meals together, studying together, and activities together. Those activities may have to be isolated to the dorm itself if you live in a residential neighborhood, but if your dorms are on a closed campus, outdoor activities might be a possibility. Think through this.
- Unless you have a walled campus, think about setting up clearer boundaries than you've had in the past and limiting student movements within those boundaries.
- If you have a central dining hall, the students will need to be able to move from dorm to the dining area. This presumes a closed campus. Should you stop visits between your dorms during this time? You should probably do so.
- You should isolate the campus from the outside community immediately. You do not want to be accused of spreading the virus needlessly. This means having your day students and staff kids who live off campus stay away from the dorms. Do not let your dorm students leave campus. Similarly, staff should remain on campus except for the usual grocery runs and other needs.
- Think about delivery of services like groceries and other supplies. How will you screen visitors? If you happen to experience an outbreak, then you will need to push your campus perimeters out farther and have a new drop off location for delivery trucks, perhaps at the campus gates and not the loading dock near the kitchen.

- If your dorms are not situated on a closed campus, but in a neighborhood, you will have to set up extra precautions for those who can come into the dorm and who can go out. Think about how the delivery of meals and services will work with individual dorms.
- If there is an outbreak, think about how you will quarantine a boarding student or a staff member on campus. You probably already do something similar for normal flu outbreaks. Think about how those sick individuals will be visited and served. Is it possible to identify one building near the front of campus for those not feeling well so outside medical personnel can visit? Do you have a school nurse that can play a role in this?
- Be in touch with local authorities about your plans and your situation. Get their advice. Explain to them your situation and ask for their help in making your plans.

## What Does Home-Based Learning Look Like in the Dorm?

- Does each student have what they need (devices) to participate fully in the home-based learning? Does each dorm have the necessary internet bandwidth to support increased amounts of time online for the students? Consider a rotation of who can go online if Wi-Fi is inadequate.
- What about filters on the Wi-Fi signal in each dorm to help keep kids safe online?
- Have you thought through child safety and the issue of home-based learning? Hopefully, the school has thought through the interaction between adult teachers and individual students and how that is monitored.
- Where will the actual school day learning take place in the dorm? In one common room or can each student work from their bedrooms? What about studying with their friend or roommate? Do you take attendance? Think through possible distractions in the dorm.
- Think about a schedule to keep things as routine as possible. Starting together at a set time might be helpful. Taking breaks at set times gives everyone something to which to look forward.
- How do the dorm parents set up an environment conducive to engaged learning? Should it be a draconian study hall environment with everyone in assigned seats or a looser environment where kids can get comfortable? Or something in between?
- What about the student who studies better being alone?
- If you have more than one dorm, does each dorm follow the same expectations (hours on task) or can your dorms do things their own way? It will be important that there are consistent expectations between the dorms. Have you met as a team to discuss the new normal?
- If you have a closed campus, can you reserve the school's computer lab for several hours each day for online learning just for dorm students?
- Dorms often have study hours each evening. Will this continue given all that goes on during the normal classroom hours? If not, what will you put in its place?
- What expectations will teachers make regarding their students' engagement? How different is it from the homes of local students?
- What about boarding students who need academic support? There will likely need to be other zoom conversations between those students and specialist staff members.

## What Does Life in the Dorm Look Like?

- What routines will you keep in place and what items might be dropped? Think through wake-up times, mealtimes, room cleanliness expectations, chores in and around the dorm, and how you dress.

- It is suggested that you keep as many good routines as you can but be prepared to examine everything to make life a bit more pleasant in the new isolated environment.
- Does your program have cleaners come into the dorm? Think through that issue and how you will protect the cleaners and the students.
- Same with laundry. Do you outsource it or is it done in the dorms by staff or the students?
- Be sure to think about how you will include fun, dorm-family times, and recreation. If you can, use the outdoors. If you can't get out, what will you do for physical exercise?
- Remember that you are creating memories. The 2019/20 school year is already the most unusual one ever. How will your dorms create wonderful memories of this time? Can you create some new routines that will make you smile in years to come?
- Get creative. Have a meeting with your students to talk about how you will do life together. They will have some great ideas.
- Avoid turning to Netflix or gaming as the solution for new down times in your schedules. Get students' input on this too. Certainly, there can be times for movies and gaming, but those need to be monitored and limited appropriately. This is a good time to reintroduce some old-school board games and games like Pictionary and Charades. What about a skit night? What about contests? Try letting the kids prepare some special snacks and judging them for fun. How about your version of the American Idol show? What kinds of new celebrations can you add to your calendar?
- Have regular meetings with your set of dorm kids to talk through family issues.
- Be sure to keep posting photos about life in the dorms to the parents. Do you have a closed Facebook page or other media platforms for celebratory moments that can be shared?
- Keep on communicating with the parents about their boarding students—maybe more than ever. Let them know what's going on. Let them know about your safety plans and contingencies. Will you let them visit the dorm? Will you allow student to leave and visit parents and then come back? Think carefully about these things.
- Be sure your students have their musical instruments and access to pianos and such.
- It is assumed you will not be going to a local church. Think about doing church in each individual dorm. Watch a streamed service that your headmaster or chaplain leads or watch one of the many other streamed services out there. How about letting the students plan and lead services in the dorm?
- Consider new times of prayer in the dorms. Organize prayer in new ways in the dorm.
- Watch out for the student who is afraid, who is newly homesick, or who is down. What kinds of support are in place for emotional counseling at a distance? Do you have a counselor who can have a zoom call with individual students? Are there places in your dorm where kids can have private conversations?
- We've often said that dormitory life has been mostly designed for the extroverted person. Life in the dorm is great for the extrovert but be sure to think about your introverted students who will now find it even more difficult to find needed places for quiet and alone time. Don't worry too much for that introverted student as they seek time alone but do monitor them as you would any student.
- Be vigilant in monitoring everyone's mental and spiritual well-being. Some students will also struggle with change itself. What is the plan for supporting your staff and students through these serious issues?
- Do you have the usual medical supplies on hand in the dorm? What about the kids' medications?

- Do you have someone who can do the needed shopping for you kids? Perhaps you can produce a weekly shopping list and have a staff member in town get the things they need and deliver it safely to the dorms.

## Long-Term Planning

Finally, think through a long-term scenario. What if this goes on for many weeks or months? Prepare for that scenario now. Involve your caregivers/dorm staff in this decision making. What if kids can't go home for Spring Break? What if they can't go home for the summer? How will you give everyone down time? What if you must keep dorms open during break times without home-based learning to occupy everyone's time? Think about new ways of learning. What if you offer a short-course that last only two weeks? Or what if you could organize a service project (painting that room, or tearing down that wall that has been put on hold) on the closed campus or in the dorm?

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 Respectfully submitted,  
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 Regional Director, International Schools

*Tim Shuman serves at ACSI as the Regional Director for International Schools. He travels the world in service to international schools located in the great cities of the world and other more remote locations. Prior to joining the team at ACSI he served 24 years at Black Forest Academy, a boarding school for missionary children located in Germany. During his years at Black Forest Academy he served in a number of roles including: Resident Assistant in one of the boys' dorms, Residence Administrator over the entire boarding program (150 high schools students in residence), Principal and finally, Director of the school (Headmaster) for the last 11 years. In 2016 he oversaw a complete revision of ACSI's Manual for Boarding Accreditation. He has visited every ACSI accredited boarding program around the world and has led several boarding accreditation and consultation visits.*

## Appendix

\*Homestay best practices from ACSI International Student Program document

- The school follows well-defined procedures for recruiting and selecting of host families to include application process, background checks, interview process, and home visit.
- The school monitors monthly the living situation of all international students (not living with relatives), and accepts responsibility to oversee homestay, boarding, and school/student/family relationships.
- The school ensures that all involved in the homestay program have been thoroughly oriented, have received written guidelines, and are held accountable for the care and protection of international students. Training covers essentials such as how to share space, and food, gun, fire, medicine safety and how to communicate these items with students.
- There are clearly defined guidelines and training on appropriate boundaries, including verbal interactions, touch, who is home with whom, etc. (including siblings, guests, etc.) Students know who to go to and how to report any situations that make them uncomfortable.
- Provide ongoing training on how to be a "step-in parent" to a teen, how to incorporate them into the family structure, and non-coercively share the love of Christ.
- Provide training and expectations for the host family in how to communicate with the biological family.
- Provide students and their parents with feedback opportunities during the year and at least once a year to evaluate the host family experience.

\*\*On the issue of refunding of room and board fees

- Initial guidance from ACSI include, evaluate what portion of the boarding fees could be refunded (meals and snacks not eaten, transportation costs not incurred, utilities not used, activities not taken, etc.). Then communicate clearly to parents that there are some costs, such as mortgage payments, building upkeep that do not go away. (These are only just ideas at this point.)