

How Nancy and Rick Garron Made School “Normal” During a Pandemic

Written by Nancy and Rick Garron



Publisher's note: *As June approaches, children from high school to preschool will be graduating. High school students will put down their textbooks and iPads, while preschool children have been learning through play and social experiences. It's been a challenging year for our schools, and when you're in the business of taking care of and educating young children, finding a new way to safely operate through a pandemic was even more challenging. Despite this, Nancy and Rick Garron, Dover residents and curators of the Precious Beginnings Preschool, found a way to still make school normal and fun for the kids, ease the concerns of parents, and have a Halloween parade and a Christmas pageant. Here's how they did it.*

We realized we had to help our families because we knew the kids hadn't shut down and were still looking for us. The world may have been in a state of lockdown, but the children wanted their classmates and teachers. The first thing we did was provide weekly packs of curriculum. For two weeks, we trained together with our staff on how to host classes using Zoom, which none of us had any prior experience with. By the end of March 2020, we were hosting remote classroom sessions from four different homes, including our home (2-3 and 3-4-year-olds) and those of staff members Kim Clements (pre-K teacher), Gretchen Lapham (pre-K teacher), and Alyson Miller (our literacy specialist).

Teaching 2- and 3-year-old children on Zoom and holding their attention was no easy task. We focused on getting more animated and creative to hold their attention. We also knew engaging them visually would be important so, among other things, we built a large ramp in our dining room for a gravity-based unit and put together a large tank of water for sink and float experiment.

As June approached, we still wanted in-person graduation of some kind, so we could see each other and celebrate the end of the school year. We set up a tent with festive decorations, adorned a bridge, and played music. With each teacher socially distanced, we cheered for every child and family as they crossed the bridge to graduate. This graduation ceremony was spread over two days, and each family was queued up in the driveway for a five-minute time slot dedicated to their child.

By the end of June, we were already thinking about September and set a goal to begin the year with an outdoor classroom experience that would support in-person learning. We started by building a prototype outdoor classroom in the backyard of our home. When the MA Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) and Early Education and Care (EEC) announced their re-opening requirements, we knew our planning paid off because much of the physical groundwork was prepared. Still, there was plenty of additional work to be done. We purchased no-touch hand sanitizing stations and set up small tents and tables to receive children in the morning for daily attestation questions and sign-off. We also added window fans and air purifiers to our classrooms to provide greater ventilation.

Throughout all of this, we tried to be as communicative with parents as possible. Before opening, we did a live Zoom parent night from the school to show and explain the new procedures and take their questions. They appreciated our transparency as reflected

in the words of parents Mary Ellen and Mike O'Neill: *"It was clear to us and the other parents how much Nancy and Rick had researched how to create a safe environment for our kids. They put the kids and their development first, and we can't thank them enough for it."*

Despite the ongoing pandemic, it was important for us to still host many of the events we produce each year, even if meant changing things up to keep everyone safe. In October, we put on our annual Halloween Fashion Show and Parade by live-streaming it via Zoom from our outside classroom. In place of an in-person Christmas pageant for the families, we used our coatroom as a stage and put together a recorded production that was shared with our families.

Support from the Dover Board of Health (BOH) and our health care consultant throughout the year was incredible. After the Christmas break when the Covid number increased, the Dover BOH and our health care consultant made themselves available around the clock for conversations late at night, early mornings, and on weekends. Whenever we had concerns, they were there for us.

As the 2020-2021 school year comes to an end and COVID-19 restrictions begin to ease, we are looking forward to hosting an all-school outside graduation at the preschool in June. It has been a challenging time, and it will be a great reward to finally all be together to conclude a successful year.

We are grateful for many wonderful memories and the support of many, most notably our staff, Kim Clements, Gretchen Lapham, Katie Young, Alyson Miller, and Danielle Hooper. When the pandemic was still new and communities all over the world were in lockdown, we were still fortunate to be blessed with children dancing with their moms and dads or smiling during a Zoom session and these moments of pure joy will be forever etched in our minds. Throughout this experience, our team was resolved to laugh harder and play bigger with our children while keeping them safe and we are proud to have accomplished that goal.



The Precious Beginnings Pre-K graduating class (the "Orange Tigers"); photo credit: Tom Norton





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