

August 21, 2020

Hello to all NBS Senior Families,

By now, you have gotten the updated news about our start date, and the near-term plan for starting school. We are sorry not to be starting school in person; we want more than anything for us to be at school together! But we also want you to be safe, so we will come back together when it is safe to do so.

We are excited to get started, whether we are engaging in remote learning, gathering for a hybrid model, or hopefully, at some point, able to be altogether. Your core team of teachers this year includes Maggie for Math and Science, Michael for Humanities and Reading, and April for Writers Workshop.

As Senior teachers, we love teaching this age group: the curiosity, deepening of conversations, budding independence, and asking, “Who do I want to be in the world?” Our desire for students in 5th and 6th grade is to help grow this curiosity and wonder while giving them big ideas to chew on whether through the introduction of new cultures and thought in humanities, diving into a meaty book in reading groups, or building a framework of understanding in science. And, yes, we can do this in a remote learning environment. In fact, because of our small size and learning philosophy, we believe North Branch is uniquely positioned to offer excellent instruction online. We can quickly assess if students understand the concepts we’re teaching; we can create small group learning experiences; we can extend and enrich the curriculum based on student needs and interests; and we can offer supplemental, individualized instructional materials when needed. We are committed not just to teaching remotely but to building a learning community. We know engagement is key when learning online, and we’re upping the ante this year with new experiences and activities. We’ve also created a schedule with more daily touchpoints to ensure students find a healthy rhythm, have accountability and an opportunity to ask questions or receive clarification, develop good routines, and have more opportunity to engage with friends and classmates.

**Schedule:** Here is a link to the Senior online schedule: [Senior Schedule](#) Last spring, we had online classes for 3 half-days each week. That was all right for the emergency situation we were in, but now we’d like to bolster our plan a bit. You’ll see that we’re meeting for 4 days a week until about 2 pm, except for Wednesdays, when we have Writing Workshop, writing conferences and Math scheduled in the first part of the morning. Wednesdays will also include optional small group activities in person, at school. We’ve also increased the length of classes

to give ourselves time for more conversation with students and time for students to be with each other. Fitting in all the instruction we wanted in 30-minute classes in the spring left very little time for the casual conversations we value. As well, we've added short breaks after each class for moving around for a few minutes, and a long break from the screen at lunchtime.

**Website:** Our new Senior [website](#) is your one-stop location for all news, assignments and all things Senior. We are adding to the functionality and ease-of use for this website and will have everything fine tuned ASAP. This will include an easy-to-find and simple-to-use assignment checklist to alleviate confusion and frustration at home.

### **Humanities, Reading, and Science**

The curriculum for this year is one of our favorites! This fall, Michael will delve into *Early Life on Earth*, *Dinosaurs*, and *Early Humans*. He is busy pulling together exciting new books for this year's reading program, some that are directly related to our curriculum and some that are just for fun! Smith will be in some of our reading classes and will bring his life-long passion for reading to our group. Science studies will match up with Humanities as Maggie helps you learn more about plate tectonics, the ring of fire, earthquakes, and rock identification as part of our *Geology* study. The fall will also include a closer look at *Arthropods*, both modern and ancient, Charles Darwin and his ideas about *Evolution*, and a unit on *Early Mammals*. Later on we'll compare the skeletons of various animals, and put together the bones of a baby bear skeleton in a *Comparative Anatomy* study. Later in the fall, when we are able to be at school again, we have fun plans for being out in the woods to learn about some of the things early people had to contend with - building shelters, cooking on a fire, and observing and learning about our natural environment. We are also envisioning having two different "tribes" create a simple language, explore important laws to live by, and create traditions. Karen has an exciting new database of art resources, and she is excited to work in consultation with Senior teachers and our units of study.

### **Writers Workshop**

Students always love writing with April. In Word Work, the smaller sizes will give April even more opportunities to zero in on each student's learning needs and goals. She is committed to creating individualized learning plans with each student to identify strengths, areas for improvement, goals, and writing interests. In addition, she's excited to give students real-world writing experiences such as creating a digital magazine, writing a short story to turn into a children's book, creating a poetry chapter book and more to share with friends and family. In the schedule, we are including paired/small group weekly conferences with April where students can ask questions, receive personalized feedback, and work on individual writing skills and goals. Seniors will utilize Membean for Vocabulary, an online program that uses the latest research into how the brain remembers and stores information to help students build a

strong vocabulary. For Grammar, April will include instruction as mini-lessons in class. These mini-lessons will allow students to focus on one or two concepts at a time in their individual writing. Above all, April is looking forward to writing with your children this year - whether online or in person!

### **Math**

Maggie is thrilled to be teaching math to all of the Seniors this year. She and other NBS math teachers have spent time this summer in math webinars and online courses adding to our virtual and in-person toolboxes. Maggie has ideas for using Google Jamboard, a cool new low-tech device called a Mirror Cam, and the good old-fashioned student whiteboard to “look over the shoulder” of students as they work. Physical manipulatives will include materials sent home periodically or that can easily be found around the house. She is also excited to incorporate the use of digital manipulatives offered by [brainingcamp.com](http://brainingcamp.com). Maggie will ask kids to question, look for patterns, and find multiple and varied solutions. In line with our NBS philosophy, she fosters an environment in which it’s okay to try strategies that don’t work out; we learn from our mistakes and the need to find other ways to envision a problem and arrive at a solution. Together, we will engage in rich discussion to both understand a problem, and share our strategies and solutions. Math class is a time to build our skills while we learn and interact with each other.

### **Spanish**

It is our goal to offer Spanish with Celeste to Seniors this year. She will meet twice a week with all students. In addition to helping students grow their language skills, she is excited to share her knowledge of Spanish-speaking cultures.

### **Deeper Dive**

At our website, found at this [link](#), we’ll be offering links to various resources that students might want to pursue. These might be videos, articles, or activities that teachers have found. If students or parents have other ideas to offer, please let us know and we can post these too.

### **Outdoor Activities**

We will also offer some outdoor fun for Seniors and Middle Schoolers on Wednesday afternoons. Details are being worked out--Katrien would like to offer pickleball and just needs to get permission to use the Crozet Park courts. Smith will offer something else at school. Michael may offer something music or art related. Maggie will be offering one science activity a week, which students can join on Tuesday, Wednesday, or Thursday afternoons. These offerings are completely optional and designed to give kids some time together outside with friends in a safe way.

## Communication

Many thanks to those of you who have sent notes of support and who have offered feedback in response to our questions. It has been great to make those connections, and your comments and ideas have given us valuable information in building our remote learning plan. We understand that many of you may have concerns about what our at-home and online learning time will look like, and we have worked hard to build a schedule that incorporates things that worked well from the spring, and find alternative ways to approach the things that did not work as well. For ongoing communication, we will set up a Family Communication document for each child's family so that we can have ongoing back-and-forth access to sharing about things that are going great, or that need some more attention.

Please know that even though we all quickly say *online learning* because it is the easiest go-to phrase, we are committed to thinking of this experience as remote or at-home learning, which includes online time. It will necessarily involve online meetings and use of resources, but we are committed to providing students with hands-on and active alternatives when it makes sense, such as building, drawing, or finding something to prepare for a class. This year's groups will be relatively small, usually 7- 8 students, a good size for teachers to engage with each child as well as give the students a chance to connect with each other. We've learned how to use breakout rooms to give pairs or teams a chance to work together at times! As well, there are a couple of times built into the schedule for even smaller group work and the possibility of one-on-one time as needed.

If you have any questions between now and then, please contact any one of us: [maggieb@nbsva.org](mailto:maggieb@nbsva.org), [aprile@nbsva.org](mailto:aprile@nbsva.org) or [michaeld@nbsva.org](mailto:michaeld@nbsva.org). If you have specific concerns or ideas, please let us know.

Thank you for staying with us during this uncertain time full of unexpected changes. Online learning isn't what we were expecting, but we know you'll find that, even remotely, we have new ways to teach and learn this year, and we are thrilled to be doing it with this group of kids. We hope you have a safe and relaxing Labor Day weekend, and we look forward to seeing you at school on September 8!

Sincerely,  
The Senior Team

*Michael, Maggie, April, and Smith*