

St. Mary's Secondary School, New Ross, Co. Wexford



Principal: John Michael Porter



The below article as taken from an interview given to [New Ross Standard](#) by St. Mary's Secondary School, New Ross Principal John Michael Porter.

Secondary school teachers across the district have been going above and beyond to help their students keep on track as much as possible with their academic studies during these long days of coronavirus restrictions.

Using Google Classroom and videos, teachers have upskilled, gotten creative, made sacrifices, all to help their students. St Mary's Secondary School principal John Michael Porter said that in all his years teaching and as a principal he has never seen anything on the scale of the coronavirus. He said the worst thing that can happen now is for the Government to announce that schools will have to re-open in mid to late-May.

'Phenomenal work is being done at the moment. I have never come across anything like this. We have had difficulties in which students were out sick for an extended period of time. From our side we would support the individual student who would be absent from school for a lengthy period of time, not supporting a whole school of 610 students.'

Mr Porter said the school's 40 staff have been outstanding in adapting to massive change. Preparation helped.

'For our sixth years, earlier in the year I set up every student in the school with a Gmail account linked in with the school. Some teachers had been working on that model of Google Classrooms. This has brought all that to a head and now we have more and more staff online with the sixth years.' Some students are missing the face-to-face, classroom setting and to help them, some teachers have been posting videos so students can see them. Mr Porter sent a survey to sixth years asking them about how they are finding the new systems and some said they miss school.

'Even watching the teachers' videos, some would miss being able to ask questions in a live setting so we are looking a Zoom or Skype so we can get live contact sessions.'

The battle for devices – and broadband – in some family homes is also creating difficulties. 'All students have access to a device to work on but in a lot of areas, coverage is the problem. We have a lot of rural students and teachers and many, like in my house, are working off one megabits, at maximum. For teachers working from home trying to upload the information and documents it becomes difficult and the same goes for students. What can take three minutes in school is taking 30 minutes at home. It's like going back to the old dial-up days,' said Mr Porter.

'There is also an issue where you have other family members using Netflix and there may be only one or two devices in a house that everyone wants to be on. You might have three or four children under one roof.' Mr Porter said it is important that students and teachers don't feel overwhelmed, adding that having a good routine is essential.

He said anxiety about finances is a real issue in some houses now with parents out of work, adding that the most important thing students can learn is to be understanding of their family members.

He said Leaving Cert and Junior Certificate students should continue their study preparations with the belief that they will go ahead in June. 'The idea is that they continue on with that mindset. We, as principals, are only hearing the same as everybody else. It's ever-moving goalposts but we want our students to keep working away.'

Mr Porter said teachers have been excellent, with some offering to help teachers who aren't very computer savvy to get up to speed with teaching programs. 'That has helped as teachers learning new skills have a familiar voice and face teaching them.'

He said it is a time of anxiety and stress for everyone, with parents, teachers and students experiencing anxiety. He said a survey will also be sent to first, second, TY and fifth year students.

'Teachers have sent them out information. First years are very good at getting information back as well. It's important for them to touch base every day, but not everyone is a self-motivated learner.'

Mr Porter said when students return to school everything will have to be re-evaluated, taking into account the interruption of studies.

"We'll have to reset things. We know not everyone will come back at the same level as we would normally expect for late in the academic year.' Good Counsel College principal Mark O'Brien said: 'Throughout this week we have grappled with what we hope is a new short term reality – a decline in that face-to-face contact in our community. Teachers have embraced technology to replace that valuable face-to face classroom interaction and personal relationship. Students have engaged enthusiastically and diligently with the work.' He said parents have provided every available resource they have to support their family's learning and safety.

'All of this going on while life around us is different. All of the while we have carried our own concerns, questions and emotions? Our values of unity, truth and love can help to guide us in all of this where we care for each other in a spirit of team work, patience and understanding.'

Mr O'Brien said: 'I am aware for each of us managing our day is difficult for various reasons. For some of us we just want to be left to our own devices and left to study or work without interruption. For others we need the support, the crutch if you like, of online lessons, notes and communications. For more there is work to be done at home on the farm or business during the day. We are in the early stages of this and as described in our Charter we are a 'Learning Community'.' He urged people to use the school website to access further supports and information.

'Be kind to yourself through all of this. Keep things slow, steady and simple! Learning to use new technology can be draining and challenging on top of creating resources and studying or preparing for assessments in a climate of uncertainty. We, and in particular our exam students, should work on the assumption that exams are going ahead and remain focused for that challenge. Remember that the DES and SEC do not act in a vacuum and accommodations will have to be made that do not disadvantage any student. Some of these we may agree with and others we may disagree with

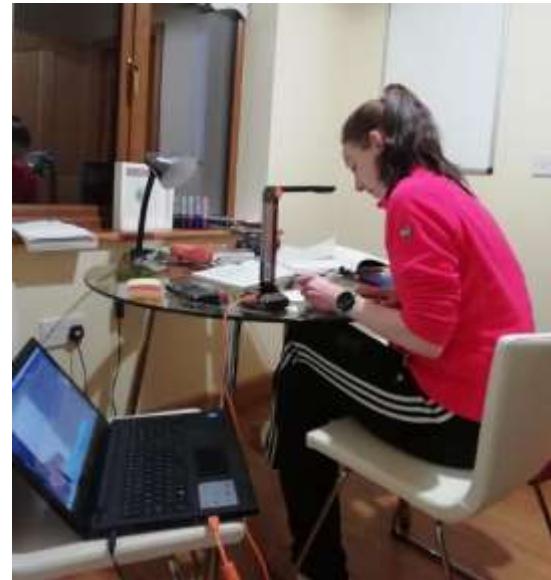
'but we should not dwell on them or allow them to consume our thoughts. Try to filter out the social media hysteria and euphoria that is prevalent around this.'

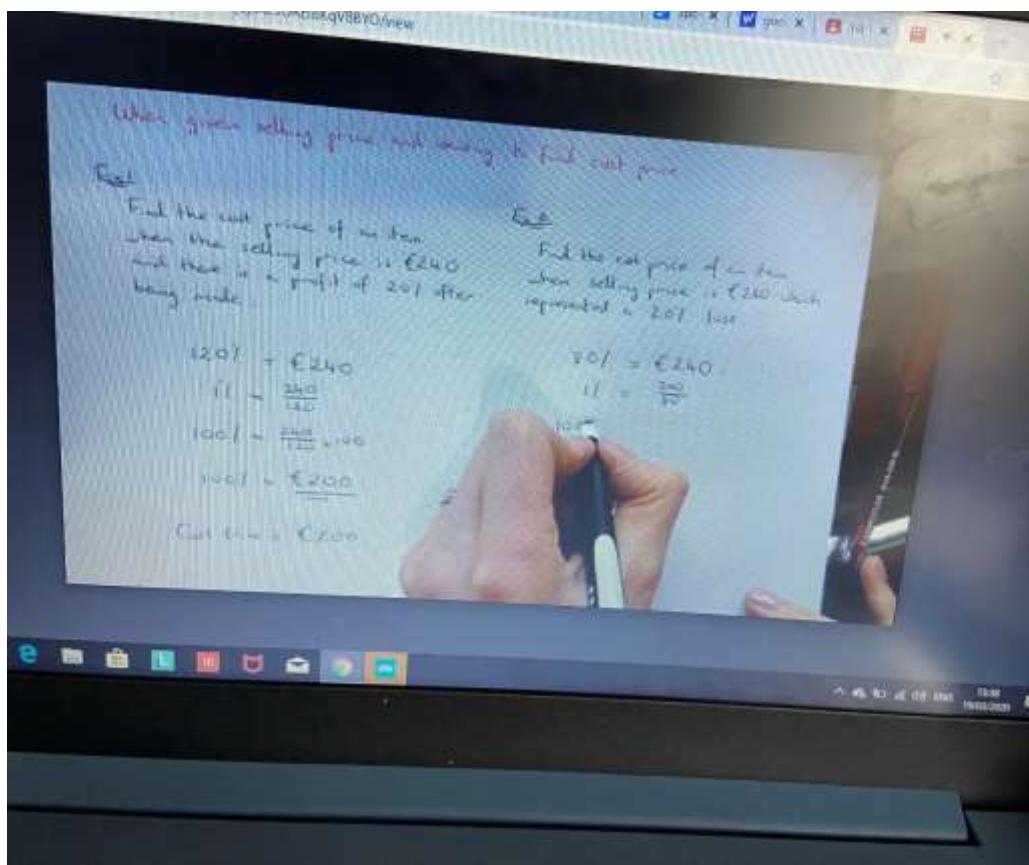
'He reminded students of the strong pastoral supports for all community members in the college and they are still available.

'If you need to talk with someone then please do. Do not keep your worries and anxieties to yourself. If you do not want to talk with friends or family then you can email our Chaplains, Ms Bolger or Fr Collender, and they will be in contact with you. This time may also provide an opportunity for our 5th Years to research courses and programmes. Our Guidance Counsellor, Ms Byrne, will keep you up to date with any changes or pertinent information through text to parents, twitter or on our website. Their email addresses should you need them are: helen.bolger@goodcounselcollege.ie, michael.collender@goodcounselcollege.ie and jane.byrne@goodcounselcollege.ie.'

There are many other external supports such as Parentline, Childline, Barnardos, Ferns Diocesan Youth Services (FDYS) and TUSLA available to offer support to each of us should the need arise and you will also find more details on our Child Protection page.

'Staying physically active will help to maintain our wellbeing. Our Physical Education Department have given some valuable resources for all of our families, including parents and staff, to try out. It is important that we all close the screens and look inwards to ourselves, our families and loved ones. Catch breath and catch up with those around you, share how you are and ask others the same. Remember, this will pass and it is our relationships with one another that will sustain us.'





The pictures above show Annette Larkin of St. Mary's Secondary School teaching her students remotely from home using technology that allows students to see what she is writing.