



In normal times, Oscar DePriest Elementary serves as an oasis for about five hundred students from pre-kindergarten to eighth grade, the vast majority of whom come from low-income households. Photographs by Samantha Cabrera Friend for The New Yorker

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RUNNING A VIRTUAL SCHOOL ON CHICAGO'S WEST SIDE

A principal and her teachers are learning how to support students during the hardest year of many of their lives.

By Peter Slevin

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It was not even seven o'clock on the last morning in August, and Latasha Geverola, the principal at Oscar DePriest Elementary, on Chicago's West Side, was moving fast, stepping quickly through the halls in her gray sneakers. She had been all but alone in the vast building since March, when Illinois shut its schools to help prevent the spread of the coronavirus. Now teachers were arriving for the first time, as they gathered supplies to teach from home or prepared to work from their empty classrooms, and she didn't know what to expect. I asked Geverola what she did first when she got to school each day. "Freak out," she said. I couldn't tell if she was joking.

The week before, Geverola had spent Monday and Tuesday calling and e-mailing hundreds of families, alerting them to plans for a hybrid-learning schedule that would place students in school for part of each week. Then, that Wednesday, Chicago's mayor, Lori Lightfoot, reversed course and announced that there would be no in-person teaching before November 9th, owing to upticks in COVID-19 cases. Lightfoot had little choice. When Chicago Public Schools asked parents for their opinions, tens of thousands replied that they did not intend to send their children to school, and the pugnacious Chicago Teachers Union was threatening to strike if the schools reopened. Hearing the news, Geverola called families again and asked who needed a laptop.

In normal times, DePriest serves as an oasis for about five hundred students from pre-kindergarten to eighth grade, the vast majority of whom come from low-income households in Austin, a neighborhood hit hard by COVID-19 and the economic downturn. Now, Geverola and her forty-five teachers are laboring to construct a virtual world that not only instructs students but supports and embraces them during the most difficult year that many of them have ever faced. "Have I lost a lot of sleep? Yes," she told me during one of my visits to DePriest, which was named for the first Black congressman elected in the twentieth century. "I journal every day. And I go to therapy. Virtually, of course. There are seven hundred people who depend on me. That can be scary."



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It is not just COVID-19 that afflicts the DePriest community. This year is on pace to have the most murders in Chicago since the nineteen-nineties. So far, five hundred and thirty-eight people have been killed in the city, an increase of forty per cent over the same period last year. On August 19th, a nine-year-old boy and his mother were shot and seriously injured on a street eight blocks from the school, when two men stepped out of a car and fired into a crowd at lunchtime. Chicago has also seen peaceful protests against harsh police practices, as well as scattered nights of looting that have made national news. "Every morning, I look at my phone and look at the TV to make sure nothing has happened to one of our kids," Geverola told me. "If it did, I'm on e-mail." Geverola, who turned forty in March, attended Chicago Public Schools, and started her teaching career at DePriest. (She moved to other roles within C.P.S. before returning to DePriest, in 2013, to develop an International Baccalaureate program.) She often thinks about the years of limited resources and low expectations in Austin, a long-suffering area that Lightfoot promised to help during her 2019 election campaign.

“When you’re in an environment where you haven’t seen much success, it’s crippling,” Geverola said. “I want them to be proud to know that this is their school.”

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Chicago operates the nation’s third-largest public-school district, reaching more than three hundred and fifty thousand students in six hundred and forty-two schools. The administrative layers are many. It is not unusual for Geverola to receive a dozen e-mails a day from the central office, describing policies and offering guidance. And yet, despite the vastness of the system, or maybe because of it, principals have considerable autonomy. Countless decisions on staffing, budgeting, and the shape of the curriculum are Geverola’s to make, and she knows that much of the blame will fall to her if things go sour. Now in her third year in charge at DePriest, she has harnessed a network of volunteers, tutors, and funders to think creatively and deepen the school’s coffers. Working with grant funding and shifting money among DePriest accounts, she has continued to increase the school’s stash of Chromebooks and iPads to several hundred. One summer day, as she stood in a library storeroom among shelves stacked with copies of “Charlotte’s Web,” “The Old Man and the Sea,” “The Hate U Give,” and “To Kill a Mockingbird,” she explained that books are a precious commodity for a school like DePriest. “My job,” she said, “is to figure out how to push these out to families and not panic if I don’t get them back.”



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The abrupt shutdown of Chicago Public Schools, announced in March by the Illinois governor, J. B. Pritzker, a Democrat, was messy from the start. On any given day, barely half of the city's students logged into their Google accounts for school, according to C.P.S. figures. The numbers were lowest for Black students. Many children didn't have pencils or notebooks. Others didn't have reliable Internet service or computers, although Chicago officials raced to deliver a hundred thousand devices to families. Few parents had the luxury of supervising their children's virtual educations all day. This was particularly true in working-class Austin, where many parents were classified as essential workers and expected to report to their jobs.

Almost no one had taught online before or thought about how to virtually engage elementary-school children for an entire day. Suddenly doing so was "a little scary, a little bit unreal," Vivian Billups, a teacher at DePriest, recalled. With only one week off after the school year ended, she plunged into a summer class with what are called "diverse learners." Several students had reading deficits, one had suffered a brain injury, another had severe vision problems. One student was unable to connect to class with a computer, so Billups arranged for delivery of a work packet every two weeks. Finding that students did not have supplies, she drew on donations from World Vision, a charity, and filled book bags with pens, notebooks, glue, pencils and sharpeners, paper clips, and coloring books. She gave away books that belonged to her children and shared a YouTube recording of "Bud, Not Buddy." Getting creative, she kept three computers running at a time. The one in the living room was "homeroom," which included the meeting room for third graders. The one in the den was for fifth graders. The one on the patio was for fourth graders. She walked among the real rooms and brought the students together in homeroom from time to time.

Billups, who grew up nearby, learned that structure and expectations were essential. She started summer school at 8 A.M. sharp. When students did not show up or failed to return from a break during the first week, she made sure that their parents knew. A computer program allows her to monitor what students are doing on an assigned screen. (Student: "I'm working." Billups: "Why does the computer say you haven't even opened the lesson?") Students missed their friends, but several told her that they could concentrate better at home and were glad not to have to worry about bullies or what to wear. A summer student with poor vision turned out to be a voracious reader. At home, she didn't feel self-conscious about using a big magnifying glass. Billups also often found it easier to talk about current events. Amid the demonstrations that followed the killing of George Floyd, in

Minneapolis, she asked her students, “Do you know why they’re protesting?” They didn’t. She pressed a few keys, found CNN, and shared interviews with Floyd’s relatives. “I was able to connect students with real events,” she said.

After Mayor Lightfoot announced that fall instruction would be virtual, a host of unresolved questions from the spring returned. One was how to connect volunteer neighborhood mentors with students when all learning is virtual. Another was whether an outdoor after-school sports program could be resurrected during the pandemic. Would everyone wear masks? Where would kids go to the bathroom? What if their parents didn’t pick kids up on time? Geverola solved one problem by moving money from her transportation budget—no field trips this fall—into an account that will pay teachers forty-nine dollars an hour to hold virtual office hours in the evening, when working parents are more likely to be available to help their children. Meanwhile, Victoria Perry, the assistant principal, was assembling a list of students who will need extra attention because they are dealing with trauma. She was also figuring how to get workbooks to families, as much to reassure parents as to help the students. “One of the biggest panics for parents was having everything digital,” Perry said. “They want something tangible to know their students are learning.”



John Yolich, a special-education teacher and curriculum adviser, has a hard time putting a positive spin on the summer's calamities. "How can we pretend that it's all good, that it'll be all right?" he asked.

Geverola knew that Internet access would remain a challenge for many families. I sat in her office one morning in August as she started dialing a hundred and twenty-four families to alert them about a program that offered free Internet service. On the floor were boxes of supplies for teachers. On shelves behind her were dozens of cheery snapshots of her family—she and her husband have two children, who are both enrolled in Chicago Public Schools—not far from a large sign that read “All I need today is a little bit of coffee and a whole lot of Jesus.” Geverola started a telephone call by asking about the DePriest student in the house. “He’s doing fine. He’s just ready to get back to y’all,” the parent said. She replied, “Tell him I miss him.” The parent explained that she had tried to schedule a

visit from a cable technician, but the company had said it needed to reschedule, “because of all the looting.”

A grandmother who was taking care of four young children during the day while her daughter and son worked told Geverola that many neighborhood elders at home with grandchildren do not understand laptop computers. “Older ones with these little ones. They’re scared,” she said. A baby cried in the background and the woman called out, “Come get your brother! Give him the bottle. Be a big sister.” Before they hung up, Geverola said, “I love you, Miss Coleman.” She answered, “I love you, too.” Between calls, Geverola ticked off a fresh series of unanswered questions about the year ahead. How does the school track attendance? What if the Internet goes down? How do teachers assess student performance? How do they connect with students who need extra support? How long is this going to last? “I’m on the struggle bus right now,” she told me. “But I’ll be O.K.”

Leeshuna Williams, a contract administrator whose office is closed because of COVID-19, has two daughters at DePriest, one in the first grade, one in the sixth. They spent summer “mostly in the house, quarantining,” she told me. “We try to go out and get ice cream, take a little walk now and then, but nothing too crazy, with the coronavirus and everything.” *And everything* means violence and aggressive policing. “It’s still in our neighborhood, and it’s getting displayed on the news. Our community really needs a lot of help,” Williams said, adding that her daughters “always have loads of questions. I don’t lie to them, because they see it already.” As the school year approached, she felt grateful that everyone would be back in action, even virtually, because she is running out of answers. “It’s about them understanding, not just knowing,” she said, of her daughters. “Everyone is definitely working together as a team to keep them updated on what’s going on in the world.”

If Wallace Wilbourn, Jr., were using his classroom, he would be putting up pictures of people whose stories resonated with West Side students, such as James Baldwin, Colin Kaepernick, and Fred Hampton, the Black Panther leader who was killed by Chicago police in 1969. Wilbourn, who grew up in the Austin neighborhood, leads a middle-school course called Individuals & Societies, an International Baccalaureate social-studies class. He is adjusting the curriculum to take account of COVID-19’s casualties, a marker of economic inequality in predominantly Black communities, as well as the year’s violence and protests, which connect with the themes of a required Chicago Public Schools unit on police brutality. Wilbourn said, of his students, “They’re interested in rights and fairness and freedom. ‘Why did they kill George Floyd?’ That’s a really deep question that takes

learning some history.” It’s hard to lead meaningful conversations when teaching through a computer, he said, and difficult to gauge students’ reactions. He worries about the “learning gap,” as students miss out on months of regular school, but predicted that teachers will innovate. “We didn’t get into it to teach virtually,” he said. “But we did get into it to teach.”

On the first days of school, DePriest was mostly empty. But when Geverola saw teachers and students in virtual classes, she said, "It means we can do it when we work together."

John Yulich, a special-education teacher and DePriest curriculum adviser, has a hard time putting a positive spin on the summer's calamities, especially for students who were already struggling at school and coping with trouble at home. "How can we pretend that it's all good, that it'll be all right? It ain't going to be all right," Yulich told me. When he returned to DePriest, on August 31st, the dean of students told him that a student's stepfather had been killed this summer. "You can get down real quick," he said, as we sat in his third-floor classroom, with its bare walls and disordered desks. But he had decided to teach virtually from school and was happy about it. "Me coming to the building, fixing up my room" made him feel, he said, "O.K., this is school." He was already thinking about the first day of class, when he would face his computer screen and ask his students about their summer vacations. He would ask whether they had watched the political Conventions. He would look to them, he said, and they would give him hope.

In the waning days of August, families began dropping by DePriest to learn how remote teaching would work, and what help the school would provide. Then, on the day after Labor Day, DePriest's virtual-classroom doors opened. Geverola said, "We thought that we jumped ahead of things by personally calling and walking families through the process of logging in. We thought we had enough devices out there and that everyone in need of Internet was in the process of getting it installed. Day One knocked us down on our bottoms!" The DePriest phones rang all day long, with families asking for equipment or log-in instructions or new passwords. But by the next day, she said, ninety per cent of students had logged in, and by Monday, she described things as "quiet." That day, she visited the homes of five students who had been late to log in, to see what they needed. One student had overslept; one needed a password reset; and three did not answer the door, prompting Geverola to leave a sticky note urging them to contact the school. At last, she had time to log into classes, where she saw "teachers teaching and students learning." Tears came to her eyes. "It means we can do it when we work together," she said. "Now time to plan meetings with teachers. We do not want to let the energy drop."

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