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READY TO SOAR

by **LINDSEY GETZ** | photography by **JODY ROBINSON**

During a time of great uncertainty, **The Meadowbrook School** went above and beyond to safely welcome students back to the classroom.

Last year presented a stiff challenge to The Meadowbrook School's mission of "bringing life to learning." While the pandemic forced many educational institutions to opt for a hybrid or largely virtual experience, The Meadowbrook School knew its students would be best served by being back in the classroom, where they could benefit from the fun, collaborative, and personalized learning environment for which the school has become known.

Such inventiveness should come as no surprise because The Meadowbrook School has been known as an innovator in education for more than 100 years. Founded in 1919 as an independent, nonsectarian country day school for boys, The Meadowbrook School now serves children in pre-school through sixth grade, ages 3 to 12, in a co-educational community setting. The school's

overarching goal: to provide children with a solid academic foundation, to nurture their curiosity, and to equip them with the essential skills they will need to thrive in middle school and beyond.

The COVID-19 pandemic threatened to disrupt all that. The school rose to the occasion, however, by implementing creative solutions designed to give students the best possible experience, while following safety protocols from the state of Pennsylvania and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. By doing so, The Meadowbrook School was able to offer in-person learning for students for the duration of 2020-21 school year.

"Everyone has been so happy to be back in person," says Director of Academic Achievement Kristen Haugen. "Nothing beats seeing the smiling faces of children, even if

it is just the way their eyes crinkle as they smile beneath a mask."

Returning to in-person learning by August 2020 was no simple feat, according to Haugen. Mandates and expectations changed frequently, adding uncertainty to what the school year would "look like" as the school ramped up efforts to keep students and faculty safe.

Cleanliness has always been a priority at The Meadowbrook School, so it was already well prepared to keep the building safe in that regard. In addition, the entire schedule was reworked. Lunch was moved outdoors or, when the weather would not cooperate, to the classroom. Handwashing was built into routines throughout the day, desks were spread out, and recess times were staggered. Whereas parents previously walked students into the building, the school

implemented a car line to facilitate safe morning drop-offs.

"We also launched Meadowbrook Outside, an outdoor initiative to hold as many classes as we could outdoors," Haugen adds. "We had three tents set up on campus, and a rotation was assigned to each tent. We decided if we had to do it, we would brand it and make it our own. Like everything we do, the focus is on making learning fun and enjoyable for the students, and this ultimately contributed to that in a positive way."

All these efforts helped to keep students safe and engaged throughout the pandemic. While some students chose to continue learning remotely, Haugen says that being open to in-person learning enabled teachers to connect with students on an intimate level.

"We recognized that not all students learn their best in the virtual environment," she adds. "In-person learning gives us the gift of time and space that we have come to appreciate more than ever. Some kids need time to process, and they will not give you their best response when you first bring up a topic. They need some time and space—and then we circle back to them. That is so much harder to do in the virtual environment, and we found some students were feeling left behind."

Haugen says the school made it clear from the start that families should "do what is best for you." While on-campus learning proceeded as normal, the school did forgo the typical field trips, assemblies, and in-person parental involvement that the school has always embraced.

"We have the word 'fun' in our mission statement—something that people don't always automatically think of when they think of school," Haugen says. "Our goal is to create hands-on, fun learning environments that help students to grow into creative and confident learners."

The Meadowbrook School went to great lengths to make sure that no student had a "lost year," especially because the early years set the tone for a student's ability to be passionate about lifelong learning. Haugen cites Meadowbrook Reads, an annual event that has become a school favorite, which this year proceeded almost the same as every other year. The reading festival aims to get students excited about reading, but it also helps the school collect benchmark assess-

ment data for student reading levels. In many schools, students would be made to complete busywork while the teacher assesses students one by one. At The Meadowbrook School, the assessment period is turned into an interactive experience that goes beyond the written word.

"This year's theme was 'Soaring into Summer,' so all of our activities were

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—KRISTEN HAUGEN,
DIRECTOR OF ACADEMIC
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focused on flight and airplanes," explains Haugen. "Students built airplanes, learned about women in flight, and read books about airplanes. The child comes home talking about a great day of having 'specials' all day but meanwhile, the teachers have collected all of the reading assessment data they need to set students up for success over the summer and next school year."

Despite the trying nature of the past year, The Meadowbrook School remains focused on doing everything it can to make learning fun and effective for students. As the school year winds to a close, in-person events have

begun to return for smaller groups. For instance, Haugen says the fifth and sixth graders would be visiting a Spanish-speaking restaurant to practice their Spanish skills. She is hopeful more of these types of activities will resume when school returns in the fall.

"We put a tremendous amount of time into rethinking traditional events and traditional schooling to give our students the best in-person experience that we could," Haugen says. "We faced so many firsts. But in the end, we saw so many students blossom and grow by being back in the classroom with us—and that made it all worth it." ■



An initiative known as Meadowbrook Outside has enabled the school to host classes and activities outdoors whenever feasible.