The Vision of Whittle School & Studios

We aim to create an extraordinary and unique school, the first truly modern institution serving children from ages three to 18 and the first global one. We want to change for the better the lives of those students who attend and, beyond our own campuses, contribute to the cause of education on every continent.

April 2020
So reads part of the first sentence of our school's mission statement. It could not be more true in these difficult times. As all of us struggle with the sadness, loss, and fear surrounding us and the globe, remember the video message our Washington, DC students and staff sent to their colleagues in Shenzhen: “tomorrow will be a better day.” It will. When this crisis has passed, it is important that all schools learn from it, build from it, and cherish even more all that we may have once taken for granted. In our particular case, these times bring the strength of our mission clearly into focus.

As families across the globe have seen hundreds of thousands of their schools shuttered, we are reminded of the deepest values of school itself. While this modern-day plague seeks to “socially distance” us from one another, we see vividly why our cultures created schools in the first place: to bring us together, bind us together. Our children don’t just enjoy being with one another. They learn better side by side. If anyone ever believed the online world would replace the physical reality of teachers and students working together, coronavirus has struck down that notion. Hundreds of millions of parents and their children long for the togetherness of school—and not just because it is more convenient. The glow of a screen will never replace the warmth of a school.

Yet, there is a place for technology and this virus has pushed all schools to explore and accelerate that too. We should codify what we have all learned from being forced away from the home fires of our schools. There are lessons for our future there too. In Whittle School & Studios’ case, the significance of our global mission rings loudly. Like so much of modern life, the virus knows no boundaries, carries no particular passport. It shows how connected our problems and opportunities are. And it demonstrates how we must learn from one another. The brave doctors and nurses of Wuhan went to the front lines first and informed the world how to save countless lives. All of us at Whittle should be inspired by their actions to build a global community that shares.

The virus is likely to be with us for some time to come, and all of us must think about the best ways to keep our children and faculty safe. The full first sentence of our mission statement reads, “our hopes are high, and by them we are bound together.” Let’s keep our hopes high.

Chris Whittle
Chairman and CEO
The outbreak of COVID-19 has brought about not only anxiety, but fear, loss, and uncertainty. Disruption has, for some, become the new normal. Isolation, a necessity to keep others safe. As educators, concerned parents, and citizens, we have all felt the impact of these difficult times. Our children, our families, and our communities are living it. Circumstance is asking us, “what now?”

The answer from our Whittle community has been humbling. Families have come out with outpouring support. Faculty members and colleagues have collaborated to deliver materials to both students and fellow educators struggling to adapt. In these times, we have stepped-up to confront difficulty with humanity and humility.

These qualities define Xianglei Yuan, a middle school math teacher at Whittle’s Shenzhen campus. Despite being quarantined in Wuhan, Yuan faced the struggles of life in lockdown with compassion and selflessness. His answer to “what now?” was to serve his community and guide his students to look ahead. His reflection on those times is included here.

We have stated in our mission that “we measure our success not through the narrowness of exclusivity but through the breadth of our impact.”

We urge you all to think of ways we can hold true to our words during this time. The impact of COVID-19 may know no borders, but our commitment, likewise, knows no boundaries.
During this difficult time, Whittle School & Studios kindly sent me medical masks twice. These resources were indispensable and necessary for controlling the epidemic. At the same time, I received many warm messages of love and support from the Whittle family, including its leaders, my colleagues, my students, and their parents. Perhaps because of this unusual time, I was extremely moved. I was so deeply touched when receiving these that my eyes ran over with tears, a rare outburst of feeling that I have never had before!

After the Spring Festival, Whittle was about to start classes online. At the time however, Wuhan had stepped up its prevention and control efforts. All Party members were required to participate in Community Pioneers to fight against the epidemic. Specifically, members would be assigned to nearby communities as volunteers. Everyone in Wuhan was greatly at risk of becoming infected during this particular period, but the city wouldn’t have functioned without the contribution of every possible volunteer. This outbreak deeply reminded me of just how small we are in this world. I believe that every small action we bring will be the power that changes the world.

Our volunteer work lasted a total of six days. After the work, we were required to undergo a 14-day quarantine period. Due to limited space at the quarantine station, we had to isolate ourselves at home. We wore masks all day, ate alone, and slept alone in separate rooms. The study was my quarantine room as I needed to teach online. My students are in their third year of middle school and were feeling pressed to further their studies. I knew that I needed to control my emotions; I would never pass my inner fears and anxieties to my students. Therefore, adjusting my mind became a part of my pre-class prep work.

In addition to presenting an optimistic attitude and positive outlook to students during class, I also talked to students about some of my personal experiences and feelings about epidemic control measures in Wuhan. I told them not to fear the virus; instead, they should attach more importance to protection. Wuhan has been filled with anxiety and tension in these past weeks, but I will never convey these fears to my students. I hope that students will feel my optimism, good health, and smiling face. Showing them a positive attitude is extremely important at this time!

Everything has been going smoothly after more than a month of online teaching. Our minds are more positive and peaceful than they were before as the coronavirus situation in Wuhan continues to improve. Our daily lives have already gradually returned to normal. I look forward to an early end to this epidemic and to coming back to campus to meet you all!

Waiting with lots of hope and gratitude!

Yuan Xianglei
Grade 9 Math Teacher at Whittle School & Studios, Shenzhen
We often hear the term “the new normal,” yet we find ourselves in an utterly abnormal state of life, one few around the world have ever faced before. In a recent social media post, I wrote, “As a global school, although we are about to enter just our 2nd week of online learning here in DC, we do so with nine weeks of extensive and rich experience—and with three months’ worth of planning and deliberate scaffolding—while testing robust tech platforms and tools in preparation for the abnormal here and now.”

In unfathomable and unexpected ways, COVID-19—which ravaged China starting in late December and now, a little more than three months later, the US and the rest of the world causing complete havoc, heavy hearts, and despair—prepared our DC school to transition into the new abnormal.

We stand on the shoulders of our Shenzhen peers and colleagues who paved the way. We reap the benefits of their planning and preparation, their lessons learned, and their suggestions about how to approach things differently and what to be particularly mindful of. Thus, we can never underestimate the potential anxiety, stress, and worry even if they have never surfaced or been expressed.

Although we would all much prefer to be at school reconnecting with one another in person, we enter our distance learning from a position of strength. The senior administrative team’s thoughtful planning alongside our teachers’ resounding commitment to supporting, guiding, and caring for students has felt heartwarming and poignant as we navigate synchronous and asynchronous learning, advising, community building, and socializing with one another.
If we were to find ourselves in the distance learning space for the remainder of the school year, I have complete faith that our teachers and staff will continuously reinvent and enhance the learning environment to ensure it is engaging, meaningful, challenging, and joyful. We have already demonstrated agility, the ability to pivot, adapt, be flexible and be responsive during this school year. We will continue to do so. There will be glitches and things won’t always work; but when they do not, we will adjust them, fix them, learn, and move forward. These challenging times call for goodwill, patience, and focus on what is important: acts of kindness and reaching out with a helping hand to others.

In this season of global adversity, we have never been more united.

At Whittle School & Studios, we commit to creating and curating resources for our families and for families around the world who innovate alongside us. We will continue to update and share resources to enable distance learning at home. After all, reimagining education requires adaptability.

As schooling moves from campuses into the living rooms of students across the globe, we are more connected than ever before. You have the ability to contribute your own ideas, your own stories, and your own insights; please share these resources freely with family, friends, neighbors, and acquaintances who might benefit.

Three key components of our vision are: “Dare to Imagine, Honor Potential, Forge Connections.”

The World of Self centers around self-aware beings: resilient individuals. The World of Knowledge around rigorous scholars: intrepid explorers. The World of Humanity around ethical citizens: creative builders. All are critically important right now, and resiliency and ethical citizenry lead the way. We will care for our community, respond to it’s needs, and get through this together.

Dennis Bisgaard
Head of School, Washington, DC
This is a challenging time for schooling communities all over the world. Now more than ever, sharing information, experiences, and best practices is our best tool to finding solutions and overcoming these global disruptions. As the world's first global school with a network of connections within our community, we are in a unique position to share information to those beyond our community who are preparing for, launching, and implementing remote learning programs, as well as engaging with families. Central to our ethos is our global learning community of students, teachers, staff, and partners who we bring together under a global curriculum and common vision of creating a better future.

Over the past several months, our faculty has conducted more than 2,000 hours of online learning experiences for students at both campuses. Our faculty members have effectively integrated conventional academic subjects such as language, math, art, and humanities, successfully blended kinetic activities in online music and sports lessons, and even highly engaged students in project-based experiences involving craft-making and animation. This was made possible with careful planning, thoughtful execution, and full collaboration between our faculty and technology teams in Washington, DC, Shenzhen, and at our headquarters in New York City.

As part of a vibrant global community, how we act together to address complex, global issues like this one speaks volumes about our mission. We are bound together, and together we will forge ahead.

Special thanks to Nancy Nanka-Bruce, Caroline Hoch, Margot Allen, Susan Chen, and Anand Padmanabhan to make this project possible, and contribution faculty members across campus.
WASHINGTON, DC VIRTUAL LEARNING

On March 16, 2020, our Washington, DC campus joined many other schools around the world by closing and suspending all on-campus educational activities. In preparation, the DC faculty constructed programming appropriate for each division, incorporating and extending familiar elements of the Whittle community and curriculum such as virtual drum circles and demonstrations for Early Learners and Kindergarten as well as continuing interdisciplinary project work in the Middle and Upper Divisions. Since boarding students returned to their home states and countries, the Upper School has launched distance learning with students in eight states and four countries, spanning 13 time zones. In the first week of distance learning, students in 9th and 10th grade worked with an independent professional podcaster and the podcasting team at the Center for Strategic and International Studies coordinated by the Center of Excellence to produce podcasts that explored different facets of the coronavirus pandemic. Students are preparing to settle into this vigorous rhythm of distance learning for as long as necessary.

SHENZHEN VIRTUAL LEARNING

On February 17, 2020, our Shenzhen campus shifted to an online learning program. Throughout this transition, faculty members reflected on this new teaching method’s application to the project-based learning model that Whittle emphasizes. Students were expected to be highly involved in the classroom, interact with their teachers, and collaborate with their classmates. Figuring out how to incorporate these elements alongside active, creative forms of expression was a challenging task. According to Anand Padmanabhan, our Global Chief Information and Technology Officer, the first phase of distance learning focused primarily on using Microsoft Teams to enable teachers to share resources, assign learning tasks, and manage student submissions. The second phase, which began in early April, enabled students to make video calls from RingCentral to their teachers and classmates. Unlike recorded classes, this kind of communication afforded everyone the same opportunity to speak. Teachers were now able to watch each student’s reaction in real-time. In addition, teachers and students could split into smaller groups, at any given time, for online discussion.

A new learning management system (LMS) called “Buzz” was also introduced in this second phase. The system not only integrated basic functions such as file-sharing, but also incorporated more advanced teaching management functions that allowed teachers to track and analyze learning data to create personalized learning models for students. Our talented team of educators have risen to this unprecedented challenge and continue to create a truly comprehensive and unique online learning experience. Distance learning has allowed Whittle to not only support our community but to connect meaningfully with students. Though we remain mindful of the challenges posed on a daily basis, we are proud that our virtual learning experience still reflects the most important aspects of our daily school lives.
In a recent meeting to discuss online learning, one of my colleagues described the past few weeks as a continuous process to “pivot and adapt.” We were all figuring out what learning and instruction could look like when students were not physically on campus, which involved significant and continuous iteration and recalibration.

The phrase rang true to me, but not just in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. Start-ups tend to attract people who are comfortable in the gray areas, know how to solve problems quickly, and ideally, have a good sense of humor. The DC Studios team has been in start-up mode, pivoting and adapting, since we launched our programs last September. When the decision was made to close the DC campus and move learning and instruction to a virtual environment, it took me longer than I expected to adjust to this new normal. This reaction was confusing; I had spent the previous ten years of my career working with global online learning communities to help young people express themselves with digital tools and learn in virtual environments. Why was this different?

Well, those environments originated online. Whittle School & Studios—our inaugural cohort of students, faculty, staff, and families—originated with face-to-face human interaction in one of the most awe-inspiring buildings in Washington, DC. The people and the place were core to the experience. Online learning was always part of the long-range plan for Studios; however, I was planning for a few years down the road.

After many video meetings and conversations, a tangible plan began to emerge for DC Studios’ programs. We reached out to our cohort of StudioEnrichment instructors and invited them to adapt their courses for digital delivery. To our great delight, everyone had something to offer – from live Zoom sessions in yoga, karate, Italian, and comedy-improv, to original video content in French and an invitation to play chess online with our world-class chess coach. At the core of it all was our partners’ willingness to pivot from what they had been doing, adapt, and create something new.
One of the most essential elements to our virtual transition has been our strong relationships with individual colleagues, our partners, and our families. My colleague Rob Glancy and I have spent the last seven months building relationships with StudioEnrichment instructors—collaborating on course content, welcoming them personally upon arrival each day, and sharing course progress and information with families. It would have been difficult to call upon our partners to “pivot and adapt” to a virtual environment had we not forged individual relationships with each and every instructor. As we move into the virtual space, the DC Studios team continues to develop these relationships, providing technical support, reviewing new content, and staying connected in a time of unsettling isolation.

While our StudioEnrichment courses had a relatively logical transition from the physical classroom to a virtual experience, it was less clear how our StudioCare extended day program would evolve. Families no longer needed a traditional “aftercare” program when their children were at home, yet we wanted to create opportunities for the informal, social interactions that happen organically when students are in school. Thus, “Tuesdays with Miss T” was born—an informal, online gathering for StudioCare students to share and connect, led by Julie Trinh (a.k.a. “Miss T”). Attendance is not required in the live Zoom meeting, and the format is open; yet, students have the chance to gather and stay connected while they are away from campus and their friends.

As we set our sights on summer 2020, we are moving our traditional StudioSummer Open House to a virtual format. David Sarpal, our camp director, will lead a series of live Zoom meetings that provide families the opportunity to meet our staff, get a taste of upcoming summer programs, ask questions, and see photos and video of the Whittle campus. Mini demo videos, produced by summer instructors, will help families get to know our team and see what some of our language and specialty workshops look like. It’s also a chance for us to demonstrate how Whittle School & Studios has transitioned smoothly to a virtual environment and how we will continue to innovate.

Lisa O’Brien
General Manager, Whittle Studios, DC Campus
EXCITING PROGRESS AT WASHINGTON, DC CAMPUS

We are happy to share that progress continues at our Washington, DC campus. Our stunning music facilities, including an Orchestra Room, Black Box Theater, and Choral Hall are all on track to open early summer. The International Drive Lobby, the main entrance to the school, is also proceeding beautifully with the recent installation of lighting and other finishing touches expected this summer.

Work continues on additional classrooms and courtyards, art and other maker spaces, as well as the gymnasium and auditorium. The design team, led by Ray Bordwell, are working safely to ensure all 400,000 square feet will be ready to warmly welcome our DC students, faculty, and staff in September.
Design for Learning

As education evolves, so too should our schools. At Whittle School & Studios, we know a school is more than a building: it is an environment that nurtures growth, a space that invites exploration, and a community that generates civic-minded individuals. Our bright, airy classrooms integrate function and flexibility, allowing students to truly engage with our project-based learning model. State-of-the-art studios and spaces allow students to get hands-on with their learning as they dissect problems and fabricate solutions. Everything from our dining spaces and atriums to our performing arts and sports facilities push students to explore beyond their confines.

We invite families to join us on a virtual tour of our Shenzhen Campus as we explore not only the space, but the possibilities that surround our students everyday.

Learn more
Whittle Highlight Events

MOVING PRE-SCHOOL TO 12TH GRADE EDUCATION ONLINE DURING COVID-19

A three-part online workshop was hosted by Anand Padmanabhan, Chief Information & Technology Officer, and Dr. Richard Kuder, Lower and Middle School Division Head, Shenzhen, China Campus, in late March and early April to a global audience. More than 200 people worldwide... READ MORE

SHARING A GLOBAL MESSAGE OF HOPE: SHENZHEN CAMPUS

Students from Whittle’s Shenzhen campus were determined to provide messages of hope to their counterparts in DC and around the world. Under the guidance of their teachers, younger students made bilingual, hand-drawn postcards encouraging their DC peers to stay positive while giving them tips on... READ MORE

CHILD DEVELOPMENT & EDUCATION PRE-SCHOOL THROUGH 5TH GRADE: WASHINGTON, DC CAMPUS

Veteran education leader Dr. Val Wise led a broad discussion with Whittle’s Early Learning & Lower School Heads in Washington, DC — Stephanie Fitzgerald and Susanna Stossel. Together they explored current issues in education and how Whittle is facilitating distance learning for younger... READ MORE

EXPLORING THE GLOBAL MEANING OF CORONAVIRUS: AN UPPER SCHOOL PODCAST SERIES

In response to an X-Day question recently posed to a group of Whittle’s Upper School students, students dove into their work, producing their own research papers and podcasts on COVID-19 and... READ MORE

UPCOMING EVENTS IN May

WEBINAR: EXPLORE THE EARLY LEARNING CENTER

MAY 01
1:00PM | 2:00PM

Join DC Campus’ Head of School, Dennis Bisgaard, and admissions team members Rachel Mieszczanski and Megan Sagurton to learn more about Whittle School & Studios and the unique features of our Early Learning Center.

DC STUDIOSUMMER OPEN HOUSE (VIRTUAL)

MAY 22
4:00PM | 5:00PM

Prospective StudioSummer camp children and families can meet our staff and learn more about language immersion, specialty workshops, excursion week, and Atlas Travel programs.

SCAN OR CLICK QR CODE TO REGISTER
MOVING PRE-SCHOOL TO 12TH GRADE EDUCATION ONLINE DURING COVID-19

A three-part online workshop was hosted by Anand Padmanabhan, Chief Information & Technology Officer, and Dr. Richard Kuder, Lower and Middle School Division Head, Shenzhen, China Campus, in late March and early April to a global audience. More than 200 people worldwide have watched this series.

“Getting Started” offered insights into what items schools should plan and prepare for to be ready for unexpected situations.

“Scaffolding the Launch” provided suggested next steps to make online programs successful. Scheduling, models for support for teachers and students, just-in-time professional development for teachers, and other items were discussed.

“Execution” dove into the pedagogical aspects of online learning. Guided by the question, “How can we make learning more engaging and meaningful in an online world?” participants discussed how to make the home a successful classroom and how to develop effective instructional practices. Disciplines that didn’t easily transition into the online world were also discussed.

Whittle’s Creative Art & Design Head at its Shenzhen Campus, Alessandro Antonicelli, hosted two webinars in Italian using the leading education platform, All-school and Tuttoscuola Magazine. More than 1,000 educators in Italy participated in the online webinar to learn how Whittle School & Studios adapted to distance learning during this pandemic.
Students from Whittle’s Shenzhen campus were determined to provide messages of hope to their counterparts in DC and around the world. Under the guidance of their teachers, younger students made bilingual, hand-drawn postcards encouraging their DC peers to stay positive while giving them tips on learning from home. Students in older grades had a deeper understanding of the impact of this recent outbreak. Ninth-graders incorporated their mixed feelings into a poem, along with pictures that reflected their mood. Many students expressed their longing for a return to normalcy. Others offered messages of advice and comfort.

We believe that such poetic and powerful words from our Shenzhen students will give our friends in the United States, and around the world, a sense of support.

**SHARING A GLOBAL MESSAGE OF HOPE: SHENZHEN CAMPUS**

Some words for our learners include:

*Though we are far away*
*Like the distance between the letter “I” and the letter “U”*
*You are not alone*
*For my heart is there for you.*

We believe that such poetic and powerful words from our Shenzhen students will give our friends in the United States, and around the world, a sense of support.
WEBINAR:  
Child Development & Education for Your Child PreK through 5th Grade 

EXPLORING THE GLOBAL MEANING OF CORONAVIRUS: AN UPPER SCHOOL PODCAST SERIES 

“What is the global impact of the coronavirus outbreak?”

This was the question recently posed to a group of Whittle’s Upper School students. In response, students dove into their work, producing their own research papers and podcasts on COVID-19 and its related issues. As part of the COE Project in Washington, DC Campus, in partnership with the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), which is a world leading think tank in international affairs. The project began on February 12th, 2020 and was spearheaded by Mr. Greyson Mann of the Center for Excellence. Mr. Mann led 9th grade students while Dr. Selvakumar of the STEM team led 10th grade students through the experience. After initial discussions and research, students interviewed health care providers at the Infection Control Unit at Children’s National Hospital and global health policy experts at the CSIS. Their podcasts were evaluated in real-time by a group of health and communications experts.

Learn more
We are all connected by the world’s problems, and each of us in the world cannot stand alone during this pandemic. As a global school, Whittle School & Studios is committed to developing its students into socially responsible global citizens. Since the outbreak of COVID-19, we have been paying close attention to its spread as we guide students to pay active attention to society as a whole.

With the continuing spread of COVID-19, we are deeply aware that unity will be the hope that lights up every corner of the world. Teachers and students from our Washington, DC campus used the song “tomorrow will be better” to convey the power of hope in various languages. We truly believe that tomorrow will be better.

After the release of the song, Xinhua News Agency, the Beijing Review, China.org, the Shenzhen Special Zone Daily, Shenzhen Daily, Shenzhen Jing Daily, Shang Newspaper, and other major media outlets reprinted and shared our message, expressing their support and thanks to the teachers and students of Whittle’s Washington, DC campus.

**XinHua News:** “After watching this video, I suddenly understand what the community of a shared future for mankind is.”
**Beijing Review:** “Middle School Students from Washington, DC Sing ”Tomorrow will be Better” in Chinese To Support Wuhan, China”
**China.org:** “Heart-Warming! Students from Whittle School & Studios, Washington DC Campus Sing ”Tomorrow will be Better” in Chinese”
**Shenzhen Special Zone Daily:** “Schools in Washington use video to support China during this pandemic”
**Shenzhen Daily:** “International school in Washington, DC Creates video to support China amid epidemic”
**Shenzhen Jing Daily:** “Whittle Students and Faculty Sing Songs in Chinese to Support the Battle Against the Virus”
**Shenzhen Shang Daily:** “Heart-warming! Whittle Students Sing Song in Chinese”