

How Middletown family handles semester

‘This is just multitasking at its finest,’ mom says

Rachel Ettlinger

Times Herald-Record USA TODAY NETWORK

MIDDLETOWN – As 9-year-old Leighann Jansen sits in a chair at the dining room table for her first class of the school year, her youngest brother, 15-month-old Luca, wiggles in her lap, beating his little hands across her keyboard and rubbing them in her hair.

Seven-year-old London looks over at her big sister, grateful not to be this moment’s human jungle gym.

Leighann’s eyes stay fixed on her school-provided Chromebook, where she can see the faces of her fourth-grade peers and her Presidential Park Elementary School mastery program teacher — even as she holds Luca steady and keeps him from grabbing at four sets of school supplies.

“This,” says mom Antoinette Jansen, 34, “is just multitasking at its finest.”

Life for a family of seven

As they learn from home, the four school-aged Jansen children take turns being caregivers for each other and themselves throughout the day. Meanwhile, Antoinette and dad Louis Jansen stay busy, too, helping Jordan navigate class with his special education teacher at Twin

October to the district’s youngest learners, in a phased grade-by-grade process, according to its reopening plan. London, a second grader, could go back as soon as the end of October, and Leighann as soon as the beginning of November. Louis Jr. and Jordan, eighth and seventh graders, respectively, will stay online until at least December.

Louis Jr., 13 — the family’s go-to “tech guy” — spends most of the day working from his bottom bunk bed in a room he shares with Jordan.

The boys’ room is right off the dining room that Antoinette, a master decorator, converted into a makeshift classroom for the three other students in the house.

One child can sit at either head of the table; another can grab space in the middle. A small desk set up in the corner, that had been used by Louis for billing, provides another surface for one of the students to claim for a day.

Jordan, who has autism, says he’s fine with taking classes from home for now. He simply wakes up, walks downstairs and logs in. But he adds he’s ready to give up the at-home distractions and return to the classroom if it means he can be done with remote learning.

Sometimes, when his parents are right next to him to keep him accountable, his school work gets more difficult. Like in the spring, when his dad transformed into Mr. Jansen, “the mean

of the TV. Dad quickly flips on a pop music video, and Luca’s crinkled face transforms into a beaming smile. He dances to the music as his older siblings keep working in the other room, headphones on. One mini-crisis quickly resolved; a hundred more to go.



Louis and Antoinette Jansen of Middletown stand by while three of their four school-aged children — London, 7, Leighann, 9, and Jordan, 12 — complete virtual school work during the first day of school on Sept. 9. Louis and Antoinette have two other children: Louis Jr., 13, and Luca, 1. All of the students in the district are learning virtually for now. SETH HARRISON/USA TODAY NETWORK

Towers Middle School and connecting London to her English-Spanish dual language program teachers at Maple Hill Elementary School.

Antoinette, a stay-at-home mom, and Louis, who owns his own landscaping company called Janscaping, will spend the next few months helping their four students learn from home while balancing sibling rivalries, technology blips, grumbling tummies and any other chaos that comes with a family of seven stuck under one roof all day, every day.

Middletown city schools won't reopen district buildings until at least

gym teacher" after a certain 12-year-old embellished his athletic assignments.

"I think I like it better at the actual school," Jordan says thoughtfully. "Then I don't have to do anymore homeschooling."

His parents, meanwhile, worry the new more leisurely change of pace will make it harder for Jordan to adjust back to in-person schooling.

To stay home or return?

And if Middletown schools reopen fully in the coming months? The Jansens don't yet know what they'll do.

"I feel like if this is working, why not just do this for a year?" Louis says. "Why risk it?"

As the two talk, Luca starts crying from his spot on the rug in front