



Monteverde Friends School/ Escuela de los Amigos Monteverde

Newsletter, January/February 2021

www.mfschool.org

So Happy to See Our Students in Person!



How many different ways can our school teach our curriculum? It seems that we are counting the ways!

In March 2020 we switched, in a matter of days, to virtual teaching for our older grades. By the start of the 2020-21 school year, our hopes were dashed for in-person school and we switched to virtual at all grade levels.

And then we learned in mid-December – just before semester break and vacations – that with 37 pages of required protocols, we could move into a hybrid model, with part-time, socially-distanced classes for those who would choose to attend and continue virtual classes for the others.

Little did we know that this would be the most challenging transition of all. But as explained below, with the help of our donors, generosity of other organizations, endurance of our teachers and staff, and enthusiasm from families, as of February 1st we are offering both in-person and virtual classes.

The Amazing Campus That Makes This Possible

It seems so appropriate that as we return to limited in-person classes, it is rainbow season here. Gone are the deluges of rain that came in the wet season—September through December — now we see light mists or showers almost every morning. That's perfect conditions for rainbows that feel like a celebration for seeing our students again.

Along with the seeming miracle of rainbows, there's the miraculous good fortune that the campus of the Monteverde Cloud Forest School (known locally as the Creativa) was generously made available for MFS to use



this semester. That school had closed due to the pandemic and is hoping to open again in August for the 2021-22 school year, but has been empty since March 2020 when the pandemic started. But they are hoping to reopen in August for the 2021-22 school year.

Where many of our MFS classrooms have been set up with multiple tables with a few students at each table, separating students by 6 feet would require many more tables and much more space than our small MFS campus would allow. What to do?

Staff spoke with multiple local organizations about borrowing space but clearly the campus of the Creativa, much larger than MFS and already set up in classrooms, was ideal. Their Board generously allowed us to use the space,

without paying rent, for the semester. Our kindergarten through 4th grade are spread out at the MFS campus, while grades 5 through 12 are on the Creativa campus, just a few kilometers away.



And what a campus! It is located in the midst of a 106-acre reserve purchased by The Nature Conservancy to protect both native growth and endangered animals. Five of those acres had previously been cleared for farms and pastures, and those acres were made available to the Creativa to build almost a dozen buildings, including several with multiple classrooms that allow classes to be spread out. While that makes some ecological impact, the Creativa has also planted over 14,000 native trees and plants on the campus over the past 30 years.

Those buildings are set along a path that is a quarter mile long, but involves a 100-foot rise in elevation and offers incredible views and different microclimates along the way. Pictures can barely do justice to the amazing views, but we hope you'll enjoy the ones here.



What's Involved in Offering Safer In-Person Classes

In these pandemic times, “safe” has become a relative term. We cannot guarantee absolute safety, and parents and students are given the choice to attend in person or stay with all-virtual learning. After weighing out the educational and mental health benefits of direct contact with classmates vs. pandemic risks, MFS has taken extensive safety precautions to ensure the safest experience possible.

Most importantly, our model minimizes the number of people the student has contact with – and even that is always at a distance of 6 feet or more. Where each of our 7 existing classrooms had up to twenty students, those classrooms have now been divided into three “pods” in separate rooms. Students stay in that same classroom for all of their classes (through noon) and stay in their same group for outdoors breaks. Only teachers move from one classroom to another.

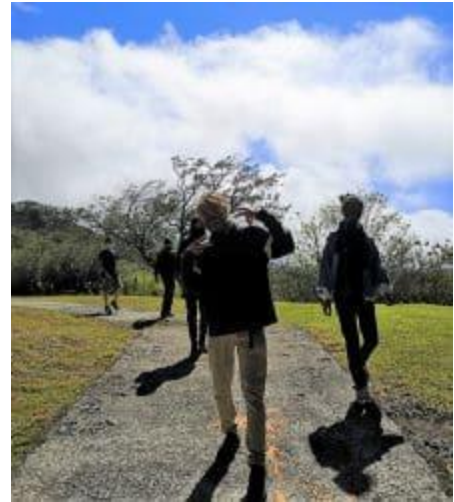
In-person learning is part-time and schedules are staggered. For example, the three 7th/8th grade pods arrive at 8:00, 8:15 and 8:30 AM on Mondays, Tuesdays and Thursdays. Other grades have their own mixes of days of the week for a maximum of two grades per day.



In addition, as students arrive, their temperature is taken and must be normal before they can enter the campus. Next, they proceed to a

designated spot for their pod, standing 6 feet from other students. Each student has an assigned number for the semester so that once they head toward their classroom in that order, the student with the farthest desk washes their hands and enters first. Others follow in order to minimize passing close to each other. The process is reversed when students leave the classroom.

Yes, it is very complicated. And yes, we would be very happy to avoid all these procedures. But we are immensely grateful that Maggie Fatovic, our Academic Sub-Director, put the enormously complicated puzzle of the schedule together to make this all work. And if this is the price of meeting in person and staying safer, we'll continue to do it all.



And Now, With Your Help, We Turn to Next Year ...

It is hard to imagine what the next school year will look like, but nonetheless we need to develop our FY 2021-22 (July through June) budget, and by March, have parents submit their applications for scholarships.

Will the pandemic have settled down, given the availability of the vaccine and Costa Rica's relatively low rates of infection? Will we be able to return to all in-person classes then? Will we be able to fit all classes on the MFS campus again? Or will hybrid classes have to continue, and if so, where will they be?

We'll likely plan with the hope for in-person classes, but adjust as necessary. But the big question is, how much will parents will be able to pay?

With staff and expense cuts, we reduced our tuition this year by 25%. Even with such a dramatic cut, scholarship requests nearly doubled as Monteverde's tourism-based economy collapsed. Over 70% of our parents faced either reduced hours or lost their jobs. Thankfully our donor support in early 2020 was very strong and we were able to grant all scholarship requests and welcome all returning students.

While COVID rates for Costa Rica are ebbing – 500 or fewer cases per day for a country of 5 million people — tourism is recovering very slowly. Over the Christmas holidays, Monteverde hotels experienced 40% to 50% occupancy where traditionally they would have been full. Restaurants are getting busier and we see tourist buses on our roads, but nowhere near historical levels for this, the dry season. January through May are the busiest months of the year for tourism and it is a time when many locals must earn what they need to cover expenses for the rest of the year.

While not as disastrous as last year, we don't expect a full recovery for our tuition, and we expect scholarship requests at perhaps 50% more than pre-pandemic levels. It is our practice to reserve many of the donations for the current fiscal year to cover scholarships for the following year.

To our amazement, after giving so much in the early months of the pandemic, our donors have continued their generosity, showing little "donor fatigue". While we are doing well on this year's donations, even after covering some extra costs for the current year, we still need to push to get enough for next year's scholarships.

That's where we turn to our wonderful supporters! We hope we can count on your continued support, and we will keep you posted on our budget and scholarship needs.

Through partner organizations in the United States and Canada, we are able to accept tax deductible donations there as well as in Costa Rica.

We hope you'll find the best route for your donation by clicking below!

