

We arrived at St. Paul's after dark on Saturday, October 13, having left Miami at 7 a.m. that morning. The next day, after church services, I toured the school grounds, and helped unpack the duffel bags and cartons of school materials we had brought with us. Monday morning I observed the daily routine of the start of school, and toured four Math classes. My impressions of the classrooms, teachers, and students are generally positive. The building is still under construction, so there is constant background noise, construction debris, and dust. The student numbers in the lower grades are large, 41 students in the 3rd grade, and become smaller in the upper grade levels. It appears that the students are placed in the classes based on prior experience, and not by age. It was explained to me that many students drop in and out of school based on family circumstances, so that some 4th graders are 14 years old, and some are 9 years old. The sixth grade students appeared to me to be in their early and middle teen years (13-16). Students sit at writing benches, about 8 feet long, with a slanted 8 foot board running parallel to the seat and 2 feet higher for writing. The surface of the seat and the writing benches is scarred with the initials and doodles of prior students; I would think that this rough surface and the angle that the writing board is at would make writing difficult.

In the crowded classrooms, students had little room to write in their notebooks. Their notebooks are what we would call composition books: smaller than a spiral notebook, and with a hard cardboard cover. The Math classes used a paperback text/workbook written in French, and copied problems from that into the composition book. Classes were arranged with younger students in the front, and older students looking over their heads and sitting in the back. The content of the math textbooks seemed comparable to basic math texts I have seen and used here; however, the approach was very traditional. Students do not have calculators, and answers are determined by using formulas and procedures, rather than creative problem solving with written or verbal reflections. The dominant teaching method was lecture and demonstration on the chalk board. Due to the design of the student benches, and the large number of students, it is a challenge to contemplate cooperative groupings of students.

The teachers are hampered by the complete lack of materials in the classrooms. There are no teacher desks, file cabinets, book cases, or ways to display anything on the walls. All of the classrooms are the same configuration, and the teachers carry everything they need and use in their brief cases, including chalk, erasers, texts, grade books, attendance books, etc. The chalkboards, although new, have not stood up well, and are already scratched and difficult to write on or read from the back of the room, where the older students sit. There are electric outlets in the classrooms, but no electricity. The windows are openings in the wall, and are placed on parallel walls to catch cross breezes, but in the larger classes, it gets very warm, due to the number of bodies in the room. Some students appear to be very tired and have their heads down on the writing boards, and it is my understanding that they are often up very early doing chores and bringing water to their families. I was told that they do not eat breakfast, and that the lunch provided at school is often the only meal of the day. However, that is eaten after classes are finished, and conventional wisdom would say that giving students nourishment before school would positively impact their learning.

Despite these problems, I was impressed with both students and teachers. The teachers show great classroom management skills, and the students are well behaved and attentive. Most students had a pack with a composition book, math book, etc. in it. They would immediately get the book requested by the teacher. There were no pencil sharpeners in the room, or boxes of tissue, or wastebaskets; all of which can be distractions to American students to put off getting to work. There really appeared to be an eagerness to learn, which was refreshing, having come from a large suburban middle school, where some students are "too cool for school". I observed the teachers writing the daily agenda on the board, including the concepts to be taught and the national standards being covered. There is an obvious respect for education, with the students in clean fresh uniforms and the teachers dressed professionally. There is an atmosphere of mutual respect between teachers and students. Classes are taught in the morning, and the School Mission schedule was to eat lunch with the teachers, and then dismiss for seminar. The first seminar's subject was French grammar, and as I do not speak French I skipped it in order to have some reflection time. The teachers asked after me, and the rest of the trip I enjoyed being a part of the seminars. I would like to learn French, as it is obviously crucial to the success of St. Paul's. It was the common language between the members of the School Mission and teachers, staff, and students at St. Paul's. I appreciate the

time spent by Pat Peterson, Judy Reid, and Bev Robinson in translating for me, but I agree that their time could have been better spent, what with all the work that needs to be done on a mission trip.

I had come prepared to share teaching techniques for the Math classes, but Fr. Kesner requested I begin with Geography. The materials I had brought were on a continuum, from primary to upper elementary level. My mission colleagues helped divide up the teachers into groups, based on teaching assignments, and each group was given the geography materials appropriate for their level. It was clear that the teachers enjoyed working together, and it is my hope that they can attempt some kind of groupings within their classrooms. Each teacher group then presented a Geography lesson, using the materials. I believe that they would like more knowledge of geography, and tools to present to their classrooms. The difficulty is in finding materials that are in French: atlases, student workbooks, geographic charts and maps are usually in English. My second presentation was, by necessity, very brief because we were trying to get as much information to the teachers as possible before we left. The Math program seemed strong in comparison to Geography, so I reviewed the lesson from the earlier session, and went over the flash cards and Bingo games I had brought for Math.

We had prepared a credenza in Madame Odette's office for storage of materials, and I hope the teachers take advantage of the maps, books, games, and other items we brought. However, it is difficult for teachers to plan, grade, and organize, because of the lack of electricity in their homes. When night comes, all work ceases. It would take a very dedicated person to find the time during daylight hours to examine and become familiar with the materials we brought. Additionally, the credenza was bulging, so before any more materials are brought, there should be a system for storage set up. As mentioned earlier, there is not a stick of furniture in the classrooms, other than the student desks. I understand there is a problem with "lost" items. Perhaps a room could be converted to a teacher resource/staff development room, where materials can be kept, and teachers can meet for further professional development.

Wednesday, October 17, is Jean Jacques Desallines Day, and is observed as a national holiday. The school was not in session, but after some discussion, the teachers came for a special seminar. I know there was some disappointment, as plans had been made with family and friends, but the teachers' professionalism was satisfying. We had a good session, and, upon reflection, the extra time given us on Wednesday proved valuable. Planning for the seminars and meetings had been difficult, as there was very little knowledge base; what lessons and ideas were needed or wanted, and what would prove redundant? As a result, we went with the flow, and I had the impression that it was quite successful. Naturally, there is always one more thing you wish you had said or explained. In my case, I shared a technique for a game which is useful for remembering facts. A student stands with a card, and announces, "I am the 1st card. Who is the sum of $2+2$?" The students have each been given an index card with a sum and a question. So they need to read their card to see if they have the answer. The student with the correct answer, 4, stands and says, "I am 4. Who is the sum of $5+5$?" and the game continues around the classroom. The class can also be split into teams, and timed.

It is a great way for students to learn all kinds of facts, and can be modified for Geography (I am Denver, who is the capital of Wyoming?) Science, and other curricular areas. However, it does take time to list the questions, answers, and copy to cards. This is where the challenges of the teaching mission become clear. The teachers go home to farms and work, and would be hard pressed to give the time to planning and writing out this kind of lesson, but the fact that they have no electricity, so that when the sun goes down everything stops, makes it doubly hard.

In the final analysis, the question must be: was I an effective member of the School Mission, and, if so, can I continue in a supportive role? There is no question that my lack of French was a handicap. On the other hand, I think my recent classroom experience was a plus. Hopefully, the two will cancel each other out. I would like to share my experience with a group called RECCS (Retired Employees of Cherry Creek Schools), as well as the community of Christ's Church Castle Rock, and finally, my former students at Laredo Middle School, where I substitute teach.

It goes without saying that being a member of the School Mission trip was incredibly rewarding. I am grateful for the opportunity to participate, and hope I can be of use in the future.

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